

# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SIKH IDENTITY

J.S. GREWAL



PUBLICATION BUREAU  
PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

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DEPARTMENT OF GURU GRANTH SAHIB STUDIES  
PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SIKH IDENTITY

by  
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## FOREWORD

The Department of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Studies of the Punjabi University invites an eminent scholar every year to deliver lectures in commemoration of Guru Nanak Dev, the symbol of the freedom of conscience for all humankind. This year the Department invited Professor J.S. Grewal to deliver The Guru Nanak Commemorative Lectures on 'Sikh Identity'.

Professor J. S. Grewal delivered these lectures in February 1997. His eminence as a historian is as well acknowledged as the theme of his lectures. Keeping in mind his pioneering interest in the historiography of medieval India, it was expected that he would present his views in relation to the historiography of Sikh Identity. He has analysed the ideas and approaches of four other writers in order to bring his perspective into sharper relief. The result is a discussion of The Sikh Identity that is, at once, comprehensive insightful and profound. I trust that this monograph will be read by the scholar and the general reader, the politician and the administrator and by the Sikh and the non-Sikh alike with great profit and interest.

Finally, it is happy coincidence that the Punjabi University is able to bring out this important publication to mark the beginning of the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of the institution of the Khalsa by the Tenth Master.

PUNJABI UNIVERSITY  
PATIALA.

JOGINDER SINGH PUAR  
*Vice-Chancellor*



## PREFACE

When the Department of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala, invited me to deliver a couple of lectures in Guru Nanak Lectures Series, I thought of 'Sikh Identity' as the theme on which I could speak. I have been studying the recent debate in Sikh studies, and I know that this issue has become increasingly important. Several scholars have written on this 'sensitive' issue. I found it necessary to take into account their approaches and their views for a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

Their historiographical perspectives have been presented to be examined in the light of my own understanding of the subject.

Delivered on 14-15 February 1997 in the Senate Hall of the Punjabi University, the lectures were thrown open to discussion on my suggestion. These discussions proved to be useful for finalizing the lectures for publication. When the question of publication was broached by Dr Gurnam Kaur as the Head of the Department, it was felt that the scope of discussion may be extended to the Singh Sabha Movement. As a result, this monograph consists of three chapters: one, on the early Sikh Panth, another on the Khalsa Panth, and the third on the Singh Sabha Movement. Two contemporary works appeared to be of crucial relevance for discussion of Sikh identity: the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (for its account of the Nanak-Panthīs), and Bhai Kanh Singh Nabha's *Ham Hindū Nahīn*. Despite the fact that both these works were well known to the historians, no attempt was made to see them in the perspective of their bearing on Sikh identity. Therefore, a brief analysis of both is given in Appendices A and B.

I have been talking to a number of scholars in India and abroad on the subject of Sikh identity during the past two or three years. I learnt a good deal from my conversations with them. I take this opportunity to thank them all. Professor J.S. Puar, Vice-Chancellor of the Punjabi University, took personal interest in the

lectures. I feel thankful to him for this courtesy. Professor Balkar Singh and Dr Gurnam Kaur took the initiative to invite me to deliver these lectures. I feel grateful to them for enabling me to express my views on this important subject and to publish them for wider dissemination.

The Indian Council of Historical Research is another institution to which I am indebted for support. When I received invitation to be a National Fellow of the Council, Professor Irfan Habib was its Chairman. When I took it up Professor Ravinder Kumar was the Chairman of the Council. By this time, when my assignment is almost complete, Professor S. Settar is the Chairman. I feel happy to acknowledge their personal interest in my project on the 'contesting interpretations of the Sikh past' of which 'Sikh identity' formed an important part.

The Director of the Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, has set new aesthetic standards of production. I feel thankful to him for his personal interest in the publication of this book.

J.S. GREWAL

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# 1

## THE EARLY SIKH PANTH

The Panth of Guru Nanak is prophesied in the *Janamsākhīs*. It was a post-eventum prophecy. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the existence of this Panth was taken for granted in the early seventeenth century when the *Janamsākhīs* were being compiled. Even an outsider like the author of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* could write about the Nanak-Panthīs by the middle of the century. He uses an alternative epithet for them : the ‘Sikhs-of-the-Guru’ (*Gursikhān*). This takes us back to the time of Guru Nanak. The term ‘Sikh’ in his Japji stands for the ‘instruction’ of the Guru at one place, and for the ‘disciples’ of the Guru at another. The Sikhs of Guru Nanak, literally, had come into being in the lifetime of Guru Nanak. They were called Nanak-Panthīs not only because they believed in Guru Nanak as the fountain-head of their faith but also because all his successors represented the same light and the same office: they were ‘Nanak’.

The *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* is a well known work. It was one of the earliest Persian works to be translated into English. A fresh translation of the portion dealing with the Nanak-Panthīs has been published by the late Dr Ganda Singh. However, this portion of the *Dabistān* is yet to be seen in its proper context. For the author of this work, the Nanak-Panthīs or the Sikhs of the Guru were a distinct entity. Their identity was based on their peculiar doctrines, their institutions and their social attitudes – including their sense of commitment to matters temporal as well as spiritual.

### I

W.H. McLeod has discussed Sikh identity directly in *Who is a Sikh?* The starting point for his discussion is Guru Nanak’s highly sophisticated doctrine of the Name (*nām*) in which incarnation,

idol worship, temples, pilgrimages and sacred scriptures stand rejected. Interior discipline excludes exterior custom. The Name finds its supreme manifestation in the creation and, thus, it is the everpresent and all-pervading presence of God. To perceive this presence is to gain access to the means of mystical unity with God, a condition of supreme peace which ends the cycle of transmigration. The practice of *nām simran* involves regular meditation which reveals the presence of God all around and within oneself. The condition of emancipation could be achieved during the present life within one's inner being. The message of *nām simran* was reinforced by the first four successors of Guru Nanak and consequently it was embodied in the *Ādi Granth*. It commands the same loyalty within the modern Sikh Panth.<sup>1</sup>

No particular pattern of doctrines and devotional practices by itself could create followers. The primary basis of the community of followers which gathered around Guru Nanak was his personality which inspired veneration. The hymns he composed had an attractive quality. To this legacy was added his decision to choose a successor, establishing a lineage and ensuring a succession that was recognized as legitimate till the death of Guru Gobind Singh. This decision gave rudimentary organization to the Panth of Guru Nanak and ensured its continuing existence beyond his lifetime. Guru Amar Das established the *manjī* system which later developed into the *masand* system. Through accredited deputies the Gurus ensured contact with congregations of Sikhs which had increased in numbers and were too distant for personal contact. Another 'innovation' traditionally attributed to Guru Amar Das is compulsory commensality (*langar*) for which men and women of all castes sat in a row to eat together in the *dharamsāla*. The institution of *langar* 'plainly matched the intention of Guru Nanak'. This convention struck at a major aspect of caste, 'thereby advancing the process of defining a distinctive Sikh identity'.<sup>2</sup>

Another variety of 'innovation' concerned external ritual, which might appear to be in conflict with Guru Nanak's intention,

1. W.H. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1989, 7-10.
2. *Ibid*, 120-31.

like the digging of a sacred well (*bāoī*) at Goindwal to serve as a place of pilgrimage for Sikhs. The decision to excavate the sacred pool which marked the founding of Amritsar is also attributed to Guru Amar Das. Two other examples of 'external ritual' introduced by Guru Amar Das relate to festival days and compilation of sacred books (*pothīs*) which can be regarded as the prototype of the sacred scripture compiled by Guru Arjan in 1603-04. The martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606 marked a significant turning point in the development of the Panth, but the continuities remained important so that much that can be said about the early Sikh Panth 'applies with equal force to its seventeenth-century successor'. The faith remained essentially the same in terms of doctrinal content. The permanence of the Panth was ensured by 'ritual and administrative measures introduced by the early Gurus'.<sup>3</sup>

Were the Nanak-Panthīs (the followers of Guru Nanak and his successors) conscious of distinctions which the historians can observe in the objective situation of the Panth? What was their self-image? For McLeod, the *Ādi Granth* and the works of Bhai Gurdas give 'a normative response', an interpretation of the message of the divine Name. There is another range of understanding in the *Janamsākhīs*. 'Baba Nanak' represents piety and spiritual wisdom as the supreme exemplar of the only sure path to deliverance. The title 'Guru' makes its appearance when Guru Nanak's role as the Great Teacher is brought into focus. 'All who acknowledge him as Master and practice the simple discipline which he enjoined will find peace in this present world and liberation in the hereafter'. The *Janamsākhī* understanding of the key-doctrine of the *nām* is much less subtle and the practice of *nām simrān* means repeating 'Guru, Guru'. The path of Guru Nanak is summed up in the ideal of *nām-dān-ishnān*. The twin concepts of *sangat* and *kirtan* are emphasized in the *Janamsākhīs* 'as a regular feature of the corporate life of the Nanak-panth'. The *dharamsāla* conferred 'a distinctive identity on the Nanak-panth'. The Vaishnavas have their temple, the Yogis have their *āsan*, the Muslims have their mosque, and the Nanak-Panthīs have their *dharamsāla*. They also have their unique salutation in addition to

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3. *Ibid.* 13-14.

the distinctive ideal of *nām-dān-ishnān*. The *Janamsākhi* recognition of Guru Angad as the chosen successor and the prominence given to Guru Nanak's disputations with the representatives of other recognized *panths* are two more indicators which strengthen the impression that the emergent Sikh Panth was in the process of 'drawing its own boundaries and defining its own distinctive identity'.<sup>4</sup>

The positive indications of distinctive identity are qualified by features which imply hesitation. The sense of separateness is diminished by implied comparisons with Vaishnavas, by the suggestion that Guru Nanak might adopt various 'panthic' identities, and by the occasional claim that he regarded himself as a Hindu. As refracted through the *Janamsākhīs*, the Nanak-Panth was in the process of self-definition but had 'not yet achieved a clear awareness of separate identity'. It was in the process of 'becoming' without a sure awareness of 'having arrived'. McLeod underlines, however, that this was the popular view. In the works of Guru Arjan and Bhai Gurdas there is a strong sense of Panthic identity. The intellectual elite within the Sikh Panth moved more rapidly towards a sense of distinct identity than the general body of the Panth. The 'boundaries' might be indistinct 'but not the centre'. This difference between the elite and the bulk of the Panth would persist throughout the history of the Panth, with a difference of degree during the past hundred years or so.<sup>5</sup>

In general terms, Sikh identity in the early Panth was defined 'by a common loyalty, by common association, and by common practice'. Veneration for Guru Nanak and his legitimate successors provided 'the common loyalty'. The nature of this loyalty underwent a progressive change as the image of Nanak changed from 'Baba' to 'Guru' and to 'True King'. All who regarded themselves as Sikhs acknowledged fealty to the spiritual lineage from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. The custom of gathering at a *satsang* for regular *kirtan* sessions was also a specific and essential feature of the Nanak-Panthī identity. It was greatly strengthened by the practice of singing 'the Gurus' own

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4. *Ibid*, 15-18.

5. *Ibid*, 18.

compositions', which gave to the Nanak-Panthī gathering 'its own distinctive identity'. The nature of the Sikh *kirtan* encouraged a particular concept of the divine Word. Together with the compilation of the Granth by Guru Arjan, it prepared the way for a fundamental doctrine. 'The doctrine which it foreshadowed affirms the eternal presence of the mystical Guru within the sacred scripture and wherever his followers gather as an assembly of the Panth'.<sup>6</sup>

True to the teachings of the Gurus, Sikh assemblies were intended to be open to men and women of all castes. Identities based on caste were not obliterated but caste had nothing to do with access to liberation. The most important constituents of the Panth were Khatriṣ, Jāts and Tarkhāns. A significant number of outcastes was added much later. The *Janamsākhīs* make it perfectly plain that Sikhs were to live as ordinary men and women. 'Deliverance from the cycle of transmigration was to be achieved by remaining in the world, not by withdrawing into ritual or ascetic seclusion'. During the seventeenth century, external influences began to impinge significantly on the Panth and led eventually to a 'radical reshaping'. McLeod's reference here is to the emergence of the Khalsa identity from 1699 onwards.<sup>7</sup>

## II

Harjot Oberoi gives a summary account of the early Sikh Panth.<sup>8</sup> Guru Nanak's fundamental teaching was that 'those who wished to transcend the constant cycle of birth and death should live in accordance with the will of the Creator, which meant spending life on earth immersed in *nām simran* or remembrance of the Divine Word'. In his 'interior religiosity' there was no place for austerities, penances, pilgrimages or necessary formal worship at established religious places such as mosques and temples. This 'minimalist teaching' was hard to sustain. Significant axes of identity were provided by the successors of Guru Nanak: 'allegiance to the person

6. *Ibid.* 18-19.

7. *Ibid.* 20-22.

8. Harjot Oberoi. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1994, 47-58. With his primary interest in the late nineteenth century, Oberoi gives only one chapter to developments before the early nineteenth century which provides the background for his main thesis.

of Guru Nanak and his nine successors; identification with their teachings (*bāñī*), the foundation of congregations (*sangat*); the setting up of elaborate pilgrim centres at places like Goindwal and Amritsar; the convention of a communal meal (*langar*) and the compilation by Guru Arjan of an anthology, commonly known as the Adi Granth'. This last development turned the Sikhs eventually into a 'textual community', a group who ordered their every day life in correspondence with the text.

Oberoi looks upon the compositions of Bhai Gurdas as exceptionally good for 'understanding early Sikh identity'. A Sikh should rise daily before dawn, bathe, and recite the sacred compositions of the Gurus; he should visit a *dharamsāla* and participate in the activities of the assembled *sangat*. He should practise the precepts of the Guru to lead a harmonious life. Bhai Gurdas underlines 'the centrality' of belief and abiding faith in the person and utterances of the Sikh Gurus, and the need to visit the *dharamsāla*; he lays repeated emphasis on the *sangat* as 'a body of practitioners in faith'. He hammers the point that Muslims miss the correct path, and Hindus are caught in the snare of empty rituals and social inequalities. The solution for him is 'a Sikh way of life, a distinctive third path to human problems'. The ideal man is a *gurmukh*, a follower of the Sikh Gurus and their doctrines. There is a suggestion here of a new idiom, a separate community of believers, and 'reworking of the social order'. Bhai Gurdas is not 'completely unaware of boundaries'. But he makes no explicit statement on 'an independent Sikh identity'.<sup>9</sup>

The implicit nature of Sikh identity in the writings of Bhai Gurdas, according to Oberoi, becomes explicit with the emergence and dissemination of the *Janamsākhī* literature. This genre would not have grown enormously 'had there not been a growing awareness of issue of identity'. In one anecdote in a *Janamsākhī* Guru Nanak is commissioned by God to launch his own distinct religious community in the world. The members of this community were to be known as Nanak-Panthīs. They were to have their distinctive salutation, like the salutation of the Vaishnava Panth, the Sanyāsī Panth, the Yogīs and the Muslims. As the Vaishnavas

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9. *Ibid*, 50-51.

had their temples, the Yogīs their *āsans*, the Muslims their mosques, so the followers of Guru Nanak would have their *dharamsālas*. The ideal of the Nanak-Panthīs was to be *nām*, *dān* and *ishnān*, and they were to keep themselves unspotted while remaining householders.<sup>10</sup>

Having said all this, Oberoi goes on to state categorically that Sikhs were still in the process of evolution and growth, and the category 'Sikh' was still flexible, problematic and substantially empty. There was still critical space at the centre and periphery of the community which had not been 'appropriated and shaded in the colours of a dominant religious ideology'. The label 'Sikh' had not yet become 'hegemonic'. What Oberoi has in mind is that there was no single way of expressing association with the Sikh movement. The term Nanak-Panth was related to the person of Guru Nanak. But the terms Gurmukh-Panth, Gurmukhmarg, Nirmal-Panth and Gursikh were drawn from his key doctrines. 'This multiplicity in terminology reflects the evolving and unfixed nature of early Sikh identity'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in the *Janamsākhīs* there is 'no fixity' to Guru Nanak's image. He is 'always transforming and wandering'. He is an ascetic in one situation and a householder in another. He delights in mixing up the sartorial styles of Muslim *pīrs* and Hindu ascetics, 'chooses companions and disciples whose castes and religion do not match'. In consonance with this 'kaliedoscopic persona', Nanak is called Guru, *bhagat*, *sādh*, *faqīr*, *darvesh*, and *pīr*. The logic underlying this multiplicity is 'to convey the ever-transforming personality of Nanak'. Oberoi concludes that there was 'no fixed Sikh identity in the early-Guru period', just as there was no fixed image of Guru Nanak in the *Janamsākhīs*.<sup>12</sup>

According to Oberoi, the verse of Guru Arjan which ends with the line 'I am neither Hindu nor Muslim' cannot be interpreted to mean that the Sikhs formed a 'distinct religious community'. This verse was written in response to an older verse by Kabir and reinforces his thought. Both speak of rejecting 'the received Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies, of not taking part in their formal modes

10. *Ibid*, 50-53.

11. *Ibid*, 53.

12. *Ibid*, 55-56.

of worship and pilgrimage, of finally asserting that the mystery of the Supreme is to be resolved in one's heart'. They were not 'discounting one set of categories to embrace a new set of labels'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the collation of the *Ādi Granth* cannot be interpreted as a declaration of 'the separation of the Sikh Panth from other religious traditions'. The *Ādi Granth* did become a key cultural marker of Sikh ethnicity, but much later than the seventeenth century. Such anthologies of devotional literature, called *gutkās* or *pothīs*, were not uncommon in the seventeenth century, and their compilers and readers did not perceive the texts as statements of 'sectarian intent'. Oberoi gives the example of a manuscript compiled in Rajasthan twenty-one years before the *Ādi Granth*, known to scholars as the Fatehpur manuscript. The bulk of this manuscript is made up of Sur Das's compositions. But it contains the works of thirty-five other poets, including compositions of Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Parmanand and Kanha. That this manuscript has common features with the *Ādi Granth* is clear enough: both these anthologies have diverse contributors and 'heterodox textuality'. Oberoi concludes that these features of the *Ādi Granth* were 'far more the manifestation of a fluid Sikh identity than a signifier of exclusivity'. For Oberoi, on the whole thus, the identity of the early Sikh Panth remained 'unfixed'.<sup>14</sup>

### III

Daljeet Singh's approach to Sikh identity is different from that of McLeod and Oberoi. His first concern is to demonstrate the sovereignty and independence of Sikh religion. Guru Nanak's spiritual experience and his conception of God acquire crucial importance in this context. He had experienced God and His dynamic and creative character. God is immanent as well as transcendent; He has a will; He is the ruler and protector of the universe; He is the source of all values and virtues; and He has interest in human life. Sikh ideology springs from this conception of God. The experience of blissfulness is there, but far more important is active participation in social life after that experience. Human deeds become all important: truthful living is higher than

13. *Ibid.*, 56-58.

14. *Ibid.*, 54-58.

truth. The goal of life is not merely *nirvana* but carrying out the altruistic will of God. The *gurmukh* is the person who carries out God's will. He lives God in life. He accepts all challenges of life and supports the cause of the weak and the righteous. Thus, Sikh ideology explains the dynamism and ethical activities of the Gurus and their followers. This gives distinctive identity to Sikhism and the Sikhs.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, in Daljeet Singh's view Sikhism is a class by itself. The Indian systems are dichotomous, drawing a clear line between spiritual and empirical life; they encourage monasticism, asceticism and withdrawal; they look upon the world as distraction; they regard celibacy as a virtue; they consider woman as the temptress; they value *ahimsa*; and they support the system of caste, untouchability and pollution. Judaism and Islam are whole-life systems (not dichotomous), but they are exclusive in character. Also, at a later stage in their history, monasticism and asceticism appear as an important phenomenon. Christianity accepts involvement in life but prescribes non-resistance to evil. At a later stage in its history appear monasteries and nunneries, and still later secularism and communism which pose a virtual dichotomy between religious and empirical life. Sikhism is a whole-life system, like Judaism and Islam; but it is free from exclusiveness, and leaves no room for monasticism and withdrawal. The concept of *mīrī-pīrī* and the ideal of *sant-sipāhī* are an integral part of Sikhism. Asceticism, celibacy and downgrading of women are rejected in Sikhism together with caste ideology and *ahimsa*. All these features were rejected by Guru Nanak who organized 'a whole-life system of householders' participating in all walks of life and remaining socially responsible. Thus, Sikhism from the very beginning was different from both Indian and Semitic religions.<sup>16</sup>

The Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, is 'the most emphatic pronouncement about the distinct and independent identity of Sikhism'. This separate and authentic compilation was needed because the Gurus had 'a new thesis to give to mankind. It closed

15. Daljeet Singh. "The Sikh Identity". *Essentials of Sikhism*. Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1994, 255-58.

16. *Ibid*, 259-61.

the door to all possible controversies, and embodies a complete and final message.<sup>17</sup> Sikhism, furthermore, was different from the *bhakti* religions (including those of Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas and others): it was meant to be the basis of a new society or Panth. For this purpose Guru Nanak established centres to ensure that practical shape was given to his ideals. He started the institution of *langar* 'which was wholly revolutionary in his times'. Not only Shudras but also Muslims could sit at the same platform. Guru Nanak started the institution of succession so that the social order he had visualized and initiated should develop further. His successors created new centres as parts of a widening net-work. The idea was to knit the Sikhs together as a separate Panth or People. Guru Hargobind raised the institution of the Akal Takht. The Sikh society presented a parallel socio-political organization. Tension with the state grew and led ultimately to open clashes. Guru Gobind Singh organized the institution of *sant-sipāhī* or the Khalsa with the *amrit* ceremony. The wearing of *kirpān*, which was prescribed for the Khalsa, indicated that 'the Sikhs had neither to abandon or relax in regard to their responsibility of reaction against injustice and oppression, nor had this society to relapse into a group of Sants unconcerned with the problems of the empirical life and their responsibility to solve them'. Thus, from the very start the Gurus were aiming at the creation of 'a people imbued with the ideal of Sant-Sipahi, based on the Miri-Piri or whole-life doctrine of Guru Nanak'. The identity of the Sikhs was recognized by the political rulers of the day. Both in the field of religion and that of social growth this identity was unquestionable. 'The institution of the Panth started by Guru Nanak, the system of succession and the Ten Masters who nurtured and matured the Sikh society, the institution of Langar, brotherhood and equality, coupled with the institution of work and production, can be explained only on the assumption that Guru Nanak had a separate thesis which was calculatedly sought to be implemented'. Having discussed identity in terms of spiritual experience, the conception of God, ideology, the character of Sikhism, scripture, and the Panth, Daljeet Singh seeks to emphasize that 'Sikh identity is not in any manner artificial, it is the

17. *Ibid.* 161-62.

one that was clearly created and proclaimed by the Gurus themselves'.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV

We can look back and see that W.H. McLeod takes into account the doctrines, institutions, rituals, and the social character of the Sikh Panth as well as the consciousness of a distinctive identity among the Sikhs. The doctrine of *nām* in the hymns of Guru Nanak was much more sophisticated than in the Sant tradition. Logically, the concept of *nām simran* also differed. The goal was emancipation which could be achieved in one's lifetime as a householder. Renunciation and withdrawal were rejected. The path was open to men and women of 'all castes'. McLeod does not mention 'all creeds'. Rejection of caste distinctions was given a tangible shape in the *langar*. McLeod seems to suggest as if this institution was introduced after Guru Nanak, though it was in harmony with his attitude towards caste. The compositions of Guru Nanak and his successors were used for *kīrtan*. Here, again, the implication seems to be that the practice was introduced after Guru Nanak. Was there no congregational worship in the time of Guru Nanak? If there was, whose hymns were used for singing the praise of God? McLeod does not pose this question in the present volume but in his *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* he refers to the use of the compositions of Guru Nanak for congregational worship. Was there a fixed place of worship in the time of Guru Nanak? If so, we can trace the *dharamsāla* to the time of Guru Nanak. McLeod does underline that the practice of using the hymns of the Guru for *kīrtan* led to the compilation of sacred hymns, resulting in the subsequent compilation of the *Ādi Granth*, which got linked up with the doctrine of Guruship. He sees great significance in Guru Nanak's decision to choose a successor. However, he does not refer to the doctrine of interchange between the position of the Guru and the Sikh, which was based on Guru Nanak's decision and which eventually became the basis of the doctrine of Guru-Panth. Among 'external rituals' McLeod mentions centres of pilgrimage but there is no reference to life-cycle rituals which are attributed to Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das. He does not refer to the adoption of

18. *Ibid.* 262-65.

Gurmukhi as the script for the sacred scripture, which was a prominent mark of distinction. This critique of McLeod's position would show that the case for a distinct Sikh identity is actually stronger than what he makes out. In the context of the 'hesitation' of the non-elite, McLeod refers to Guru Nanak being presented as a 'Hindu' in certain situations. Since the connotation of 'Hindu' in the seventeenth century was not the same as in the twentieth, the *Janamsākhī* evidence has to be interpreted as his denial that he was a 'Muslim'. McLeod leaves the impression that the consciousness of distinct identity was quite clear among the intellectual elite, or at the centre, but it was not equally clear among the mass of the Sikhs, or at the periphery. This was a difference of degree.

Oberoi's conception of Guru Nanak's 'minimalist teaching' minimizes the significance of what Guru Nanak had said and ignores what he had done. He notices the development of the Sikh Panth as an objective reality and what he regards as markers of distinction. But he does not attach much importance to them. In his view, Bhai Gurdas was not altogether unaware of boundaries but did not make an explicit statement on independent Sikh identity. However, Bhai Gurdas's conception of 'a distinctive third path' is nothing short of a declaration of distinct religious identity. Oberoi appears to give some special meaning to 'religious identity' which he does not clarify in this part of his book. Elsewhere, however, he appears to imply that religious identity means the social identity of a religious community. This assumption introduces ambivalence and ambiguity into his own analysis.

Oberoi expects that only one term should have been used for the Panth of Guru Nanak and not the terms like Gurmukh-Panth, Nirmal-Panth and Gursikh as well as Nanak-Panth. However, Gursikh of Bhai Gurdas is a member of the Panth of the Guru. The other terms refer to the Panth. The multiplicity of epithets used for the Panth does not change the identity of the Panth itself. The multiplicity of epithets used for God, for example, does not compromise the unity of Godhead. Similarly, the persona of Guru Nanak presented by Oberoi ignores the essential thrust of the *Janamsākhīs* on the uniqueness and universality of Guru Nanak's

message. The Panth of Guru Nanak is projected as different not only from the Muslims but also from the Panths of the Vaishnavas, the Sanyāsīs and the Yogīs (which are now regarded as 'Hindu'). The epithets of Guru, *bhagat*, *faqīr*, *darvesh* and *pīr* are meant to convey the idea of his status to different audiences. This convention does not diffuse the persona of Guru Nanak. The consistency of his ideas brings his personality into sharp relief.

The hymn of Guru Arjan is much different in its import from the verse of Kabir. It emphasizes the distinction of religious ideas and practices, and is not merely a rejection of 'orthodoxy'. It has to be interpreted in the context of the compositions of Guru Arjan and his predecessors. Oberoi's interpretation is too constrictive to be valid. Despite diverse contributions, the primacy given to the *bāṇī* of the Gurus in the *Ādi Granth* is quite unmistakable. Furthermore, the *Ādi Granth* contains the 'contributions' of 'Shaikhs' as well as 'Bhagats'. Does Oberoi suggest that the Sikhs regarded themselves as both 'Muslim' and 'Hindu'? Or none, and therefore they had no identity? If 'heterodox textuality' means something different from diverse authorship and content, Oberoi does not make it clear. If the implication is that there are doctrinal contradictions in the text of the *Ādi Granth*, Oberoi does not demonstrate. His insistence on 'unfixed' identity of the Sikh Panth does not appear to be an inference drawn from empirical evidence but an *a priori* assumption. His interpretation of the evidence used becomes forced and far fetched. The statement that 'identity' of the early Sikh Panth was fluid and unfixed essentially means that the Sikh Panth was not distinct from the 'Hindu' society. This poses the problem of defining 'Hindu' society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and of placing 'religious communities' or Panths in that society. But Oberoi does not do this. His conception of the 'Indic' blurs the issue. Consequently, the term Nanak-Panth or Sikh Panth appears to lose all meaning for Oberoi though it carried a lot of significance for the contemporaries, both Sikh and non-Sikh. Oberoi nowhere pauses to think why the author of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* looked upon the Nanak-Panthis as distinct from all other Indians.

Daljeet Singh attaches great importance to what was said and done by Guru Nanak. Sikh identity for him is essentially the identity

of Sikhism. He underlines the close connection between the ideas of Guru Nanak and the institutions he founded. He emphasizes the importance of ideology in Sikh history. In his view, the intention of Guru Nanak and his successors was to found and develop a new kind of social order. Thus, the doctrines, the institutions, the rituals and the social attitudes of the Sikhs were all inter-linked to give them a distinct identity from the very beginning. The rulers of the time did not take long to recognize the distinctive identity of the Sikhs. The culmination came with the order of the Khalsa which clearly defined Sikh identity once for all.

For Daljeet Singh, distinct Sikh identity was not only fully formed in the time of the Gurus but it was also their creation, resulting from the ideas of Guru Nanak and the ideals, institutions, and actions based on them. He is not bothered about 'uniformity' or 'fixity' in his conceptualization of identity. McLeod makes a good case for distinct identity in the pre-Khalsa Sikh tradition but qualifies it by bringing in the notion of the centre and the periphery, the elite and the masses . Oberoi invokes more or less the same empirical evidence as McLeod, but views Sikh identity as not yet fixed or clearly defined. He minimizes the significance of both the objective socio-cultural realities and the subjective consciousness of distinction inspiring the Sikhs.

## 2

### THE KHALSA PANTH

Daljeet Singh does not go beyond the institution of the Khalsa in his formal discussion of Sikh identity, presumably on the assumption that an independent Sikh identity was fully formed in the Khalsa once for all. W.H. McLeod and Harjot Oberoi, however, continue their discussion of Sikh identity after the institution of the Khalsa. They appreciate the importance of the Khalsa for a distinctive Sikh identity. However, they differ widely on the issue whether or not the Khalsa-Sikh identity remained dominant after the establishment of Sikh rule in the second half of the eighteenth century. We may first listen to what they have to say on Sikh identity from the institution of the Khalsa in 1699 to the fall of sovereign Sikh rule in 1849.

#### I

Two chapters in McLeod's *Who is a Sikh?* relate to the eighteenth century: one on the Khalsa and its *rahit* and the other on 'the Khalsa in the eighteenth century'. If we concentrate on the substance of his argument, ignoring the way in which it is developed, we find that he is aware of the change brought about by the institution of the Khalsa in 1699. The features which clearly emerge from the earliest known evidence are: an initiation ceremony involving use of the sword; instruction to initiants to keep their hair uncut and to wear weapons as a matter of course; to adopt the name 'Singh'; and not to smoke *hukkā*. To this core were added other items of the Khalsa *rahit* during the eighteenth century through a gradual process. In the time of Banda Bahadur, for example, there was still a dispute regarding the proper form of Khalsa observances.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, nonetheless, the Khalsa

1. W.H. McLeod. *Who is a Sikh?*, 44 & 48.

identity had become the predominant Sikh identity, and the Khalsa stood clearly distinguished from 'Hindus'. McLeod tries to isolate some elements of the evolving Khalsa tradition. For one thing, 'Muslims' became the enemy; they represented a threat to *dharma*, and their touch was polluting. Heroic resistance to tyranny, to the point of martyrdom if necessary, became an essential element of the Khalsa tradition. Heroic literature became popular as *gurbilās*. A firm belief in their own triumph led the Khalsa to the conviction that they were meant to rule: *rāj karegā Khālsā*. The *Dasam Granth* became a part of the canon. The militant spirit it breathed matched that of the eighteenth-century Khalsa. For the same reason, the cult of the Goddess exercised a strong fascination within the Panth. Due as much to such elements as to the Khalsa *rahit*, the Khalsa were quite distinguished from their contemporaries. They were relatively distinguished also from the Nanak-Panthīs of the early Sikh tradition whose identity was not so clearly pronounced as that of the Khalsa.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the eighteenth-century Sikh tradition was intimately linked with the earlier Sikh tradition. The linkages were both doctrinal and institutional. The doctrine of eternal Guru which had emerged in the early Sikh Panth was carried forward into the eighteenth century and beyond. References in the compositions of the Gurus and Bhai Gurdas to the *bāñī* and the *sangat* point towards a developed doctrine. From *bāñī* as the Guru to *Granth* as the Guru, and from the *sangat* as the Guru to the entire body of the Khalsa as the Guru, the line of development is logical and clear. 'It accommodated the final version within the established tradition of the Nanak-Panth'. The doctrine of Guru-Panth found tangible expression in the *gurmata* and the Dal Khalsa during the eighteenth century. The doctrine of Guru-*Granth* also emerged to become more important in the early nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The *dharamsāla* of the early Sikh Panth developed into the *gurdwāra* of the eighteenth century. Erecting shrines at locations associated with particular events in the lives of the individual Gurus became common, particularly after the establishment of Khalsa

2. *Ibid*, 49-51 & 57-60.

3. *Ibid*, 52-56.

rule. The *dharamsālas* continued as the centres for *kīrtan*. Eventually, however, the term *gurdwāra* came into common currency. This was because the *sangat* which met in the *dharamsāla* came to be looked upon as the Guru. Furthermore, the Granth Sahib, which too was looked upon as the Guru, came to be placed in at least the important *dharamsālas*, and the place appropriately became the Guru's door (*gurdwāra*).<sup>4</sup> McLeod does not say so, but this change in the term used for the sacred space reflected its enhanced importance in the eyes of the Sikhs.

Since all the Sikhs did not become Singhs, the Sikh Panth was larger than the Khalsa. The continuing presence of non-Khalsa Sikhs is indicated by the *B-40 Janamsākhī* which was completed in 1733. In the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama*, which was compiled by the mid-eighteenth century, there are references to Sahajdhārī Sikhs who, presumably, continued to live as Nanak-Panthī Sikhs, sustaining an identity which was much less precise than that of the baptized Khalsa. However, they too were expected to keep their *kesh* and whiskers uncut. McLeod looks upon the Udāsīs as 'an obscure group' whose affiliation to the Sikh Panth was uncertain. In terms of visibility and participation in the Panth's evolving tradition, they were rather peripheral. The Sahajdhārīs were scarcely more prominent. 'Throughout the eighteenth century it is the Khalsa which occupies the stage, consciously dominant in all that passes as Sikh history and easily communicating the impression that all such history is in fact Khalsa history'. For John Malcolm at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Khalsa stood clearly separated from 'the Hindus', but not so the other Sikhs. Another way of referring to the two main categories of Sikhs was to talk of the Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh and the Sikhs of Guru Nanak. This situation, according to McLeod, presents the 'problem of defining the Panth'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a single definition did not cover all Sikhs. Alternatively, a simple definition of the Panth could not take into account the differences between the Khalsa and the non-Khalsa Sikhs. Uniformity is assumed by McLeod to be relevant for identity.

4. *Ibid*, 56-57.

5. *Ibid*, 44-46, 57 & 60.

## II

According to Oberoi, the Sikh movement had begun to move beyond the existing cultural traditions after the execution of Guru Arjan. A continuous Jāt influx and a protracted conflict with an increasingly hostile state gave rise to new cultural patterns in the seventeenth century. The institution of the Khalsa ended ‘ambiguities of Sikh religiosity’. Following the imperial paradigm, Guru Gobind Singh undertook to establish direct contact with the Sikhs as his Khalsa and removed the debilitating mediacy of the *masands*. He instructed the Khalsa to get confirmed through the new initiation rite of *khande ki pahul*, maintain unshorn hair, and to bear arms. Every Sikh was expected to become the Guru’s Khalsa, but some of his closest disciples did not undergo Khalsa initiation. In seeking to turn the ‘fluid world of Indic religious identities upside down’ the Khalsa faced great opposition. For Oberoi, Sainapat’s statement that ‘on one side stands the Khalsa and on the other the world’ does not underline the distinct identity of the Khalsa but the opposition they met even from Sikhs.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the first three quarters of the eighteenth century were marked by ‘production and reproduction’ of Khalsa cultural identity. The *Rahitnāma* literature dwells not only on *khande ki pahul* for initiation but also on life-cycle rituals to mark birth and death. For marriage, however, the old lineage and caste customs continued to be followed. But the choice of the bridegroom was restricted to Sikhs alone. These life-cycle rituals gave enduring form to a fluid identity. The boundaries established by these rituals were reinforced by a long inventory of tabooed behaviour. Among the tabooed items was sexual intercourse with a Muslim woman, and offering prayers at a tomb, or visiting a mosque or a Hindu temple. Furthermore, the Khalsa established firm control over the central shrine at Amritsar and enunciated duties in relation to the sacred space and its management. In the eighteenth-century situation, the ‘Muslim’ became a powerful signifier of ‘otherness’. There were a dozen other groups, both Sikh and Hindu, with whom the Khalsa were expected to have no contact. A ‘distinctive Khalsa normative order had emerged by the second half of the eighteenth

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6. Harjot Oberoi. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 58–62.

century, and Khalsa identity become hegemonic within the Sikh tradition'.<sup>7</sup>

Oberoi does not fail to notice that the Khalsa cultural formation was 'not all new'. Its links with the past were visible in the Khalsa doctrines of Guru-Panth and Guru-Granth. The Khalsa cultural formation had some limitations too. The dissemination of Khalsa identity was restricted by the given means of communication. Sikh sacred geography, routes of pilgrimage and anniversaries to commemorate events in the Sikh past were still in their infancy. The Sikhs had not yet formulated distinctive marriage and mortuary rituals. The *Ādi Granth* had not yet become the exclusive focus of Sikh religiosity. Its status as a sacred text was shared by the *Dasam Granth*. 'Although the Sikh tradition was considerably purged of its fluidity by the new imaginative categories and religious practices of Khalsa Sikhs, there was still ample room within it for ambiguity, inversion and conflicting interpretations'.<sup>8</sup>

Oberoi talks of the paradox of Khalsa/Sahajdhārī duality in the late eighteenth century. All Sikhs were not happy with either the dramatic triumph of the Khalsa or the dominance of Khalsa identity. In support of this view Oberoi refers to the work of Kesar Singh Chhibbar. Nevertheless, the Khalsa Sikhs went from one success to another and their identity continued to attract recruits in increasing numbers. Paradoxically, however, as the Khalsa mode attained hegemony within Sikh tradition, it simultaneously came to be accepted that there were alternative ways of being a Sikh. The Sikh Panth was 'not coterminus with the Khalsa'. The Sikhs other than the Khalsa were often referred to as Sahajdhārīs. Oberoi feels sure that Udāsīs and Nanak-Panthīs were included in the Sahajdhārī category. To demonstrate that there was a close correspondence in 'the religious identities' of Sahajdhārīs, Nanak-Panthīs and Udāsīs, Oberoi cites a document containing instructions for the guidance of the Mahant of an Udāsī establishment in Bihar. There is no reference to Nanak-Panthīs in this document. The Mahant is told to 'remain celibate', but there is nothing else in the document which may be regarded as exceptionable by a Sahajdhārī

8. *Ibid*, 69-71 & 90-91.

9. *Ibid*, 75-78 & 91.

Sikh. In fact, the instructions professedly related to what a Sahajdhārī Sikh should or should not do. Oberoi draws the inference that Udāsīs were included in the Sahajdhārī category.<sup>9</sup>

Talking of 'Sahajdharis', Oberoi actually concentrates on the Udāsīs who for him are 'perhaps the most conspicuous and widely patronized segment among the Sahajdhari Sikhs'. In many ways 'the Sahajdhari Sikhs' totally inverted Khalsa categories of thought and religious boundaries. They cut their hair; they did not carry arms; they had a radically different line of succession; and they did not accept a text as a *gurū*. They began to manage key Sikh shrines, including the Harmandir (for a short time) and they set up their own establishments at pilgrimage centres like Amritsar, Hardwar and Benares. The model of Sikhism they enunciated diverged considerably from that of the Khalsa Sikhs. They differed from the Khalsa in their attitude towards hair, codes of dress and modes of salvation. 'In appearance perhaps no two persons could have looked more different than a Khalsa Sikh and an Udāsī of the eighteenth century'. Having actually described the Udāsīs, Oberoi looks upon his statement as a description of radical differences between 'Khalsa and Sahajdhari modes of identity'.<sup>10</sup>

In his explanation of the existence of 'duality in Sikh identity' Oberoi refers to the need of the Khalsa rulers for 'all the allies they could get'. Who could be better than the 'Sahajdharis' who recognized Nanak as a *guru*, read and recited verses from the *Ādi Granth*, served in large numbers as custodians of important Sikh shrines, and wrote mythical narratives of Sikh Gurus and textual commentaries on Sikh scriptures? Here, Oberoi is talking primarily of the Udāsīs. The Khalsa rulers also needed a reliable network of intermediaries 'to impress the new command and collect revenue for the state's coffers'. The *chaudharīs* who served as intermediaries belonged both to the central hierarchy of the state and the organization of the *birādari*, or the clan. The recognition given to *chaudharīs* meant the absorption of 'local segmentary lineages'. And this implied conservation of the pre-existing framework, with all its rituals and life-cycle ceremonies associated with Brahmanical

9. *Ibid*, 75-78 & 91.

10. *Ibid*, 76 & 78-81.

Hinduism and 'its accompanying social system encapsulated in the varna hierarchy'. Thus, the paradox in the coexistence of Khalsa and Sahajdhārī identities was 'part of the complex process of state formation'. Here, Oberoi is not talking of the Udāsīs. He is talking of the land-holding clans in the countryside. In order to suggest that Sikhs were included in this category, Oberoi cites a passage from John Malcolm which refers to Jats and Gujjars continuing their old practices, especially in relation to matrimony and commensality, after becoming Sikhs. This passage actually qualifies the statement : they could practice those civil usages and customs which did not infringe 'the tenets of Nanak, or the institutions of Guru Govind'.<sup>11</sup>

Oberoi comes to the conclusion that the increase in the number of Khalsa Sikhs during the late eighteenth century did not imply a corresponding decrease in the number of Sahajdhārīs. Records of revenue grants to religious establishments and mythical literature point towards 'a highly vibrant non-Khalsa tradition'. Oberoi goes on to add that an 'extraordinary fusion of Khalsa and non-Khalsa identities' marked out Sikh tradition in the late eighteenth century from 'what was to follow under colonial rule'.<sup>12</sup>

### III

Both McLeod and Oberoi agree that the institution of the Khalsa carried the implication that Singhs were distinct from 'Hindus' as well as the other religious communities of India. Both of them notice the existence of non-Khalsa Sikhs during the eighteenth century, referring to them as Sahajdhārīs.

Indeed, the compiler of the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama* addresses himself to the Sahajdhārī as well as the Keshdhārī Sikhs. This shows that both were regarded as members of the Panth. But who were these Sahajdhārīs? Quite clearly they did not include the groups which are denounced and virtually excommunicated in the *Rahit-Nama*, like the followers of Prithi Chand and his successors (called Minas), the followers of Dhir Mal and his successors, or the followers of Ram Rai and his successors, or those who followed any of the former *masands* or their descendants.

11. *Ibid*, 81-89.

12. *Ibid*, 90.

Both McLeod and Oberoi state that many Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh did not become his Khalsa through the initiation of the double-edged sword. Nevertheless, they believed in the ten Gurus and shared some of the doctrines and practices of the 'Singhs'. McLeod notices the suggestion that these Sikhs could have been treated as *Sahajdhārīs*. The use of the terms *sahajdhārī* and *keshdhārī* for these two categories of Sikhs indicates that the former Khalsa was now looked upon as consisting of *keshdhārī* Singhs and *sahajdhārī* Sikhs, both regarded as members of the Panth. This is the position in some of the *hukamnāmas* of Guru Gobind Singh, issued after 1699, and also in the *hukamnāmas* of Mata Sundari and Mata Sahib Devi till 1730.<sup>13</sup> It is not without significance that the compiler of the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama* visualizes individuals entering the Panth as *Sahajdhārīs* through an initiation resembling *charan pahul* in which the Guru's place is taken by the Guru-Granth. In other words, not only a *Sahajdhārī* could become a Singh, an outsider too could join the Panth as a *Sahajdhārī*.

Oberoi argues that there was no difference in the identities of *Sahajdhārīs*, *Nanak-Panthīs* and *Udāsīs*. Therefore, we may try to identify the *Nanak-Panthīs* and the *Udāsīs*, as we have tried to identify the *Sahajdhārīs*. The term *Nanak-Panthī* was generally used by Persian writers for all the followers of Guru Nanak and his successors. Even during the eighteenth century when they actually talked of 'Singhs' they could use the term *Nanak-Panthī*. This blanket term served their purpose, because they were not interested in any differences within the Panth. For them the term *Nanak-Panthī* covered all categories of Sikhs: the Khalsa, the *Sahajdhārī*, and the others. Our problem is to identify these 'others'. Oberoi finds the easy way out by merely equating them with the *Sahajdhārīs*. But there were '*Nanak-Panthīs*' other than the *Sahajdhārīs* in the eighteenth century. These were precisely the groups which stand excommunicated in the *Rahitnāmas*. They did not subscribe to the line of succession from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh; they believed in a living *guru*; and they did

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13. For the use of the term *Khalsa* for non-Singhs in the *hukamnāmas* of Guru Gobind Singh, Mata Sundari and Mata Sahib Devi, between 1699 and 1733, Ganda Singh (ed). *Hukamnāmey* (Pbi). Patiala: Punjabi University, 1967, numbers 50, 54, 55, 57, 60, 68, 73, 74, 78 & 85.

not look upon the *Ādi Granth* as the Guru. The most notable among them were Minas, Dhir Mallias and Ram Raiyas. Oberoi takes notice of them in the context of the groups with which the Khalsa were not to have any contact, but then he forgets about them. In order to talk of 'fusion' between the Khalsa and the Nanak-Panthīs, it is necessary to go into their mutual relationship. If some of them became Khalsa or Sahajdhārī Sikhs, they did not remain 'Nanak-Panthīs' of our definition prior to changing their 'affiliation'. They never became a recognized component of the Sikh Panth.

We have noted that Oberoi's Sahajdhārīs are virtually 'Udasis'. We know that they regarded Guru Nanak as a notional founder of their orders. They had altogether different lines of succession, starting actually with Sri Chand. If Oberoi thinks that they became a part of the Sikh Panth in the late eighteenth century, it would be necessary to show how. All that he has mentioned is their literary activity and the patronage of their establishments by the Sikh rulers. But the Sikh rulers patronized non-Sikh as well as Sikh religious establishments.

#### IV

From the Khalsa in the eighteenth century, McLeod formally moves on to the Singh Sabha 'reformation', leaving three quarters of a century in between. This is because of his understanding that Khalsa identity remained dominant throughout this period and that much of the eighteenth century Khalsa tradition was carried forward into the nineteenth century. At its opening in 1801, when Ranjit Singh became the Maharaja, it must have struck many as fulfilment of the *rāj karegā Khālsā* prophecy. Ranjit Singh's administration was informed by the spirit and attitudes of the eighteenth century. Individual Muslims were employed in state service but hostility towards Muslims was not yet wholly exorcised. The institution of *gurmata* was suppressed but loyal *sardārs* were duly rewarded, and substantial largesses were bestowed on prominent Sikh shrines. Conspicuous respect was paid to the traditions of the Khalsa at the court. Coinage bore the image of Guru Nanak. The administration was known as *Sarkār Khālsājī*, and the royal court was called *Darbār Khālsājī*. In several ways, thus, the state administered by Ranjit

Singh was an authentic extension of eighteenth-century Khalsa ideals.<sup>14</sup>

The outward forms of the Khalsa tradition which emerged in the eighteenth century seem to have suffered comparatively little change during the first half of the nineteenth. J.D. Cunningham in the 1840s refers to the merging of castes, the Khalsa rite of initiation, 'devotion to steel', uncut hair, blue clothing, use of the name Singh and a strict ban on smoking. The use of *kachh* distinguished Sikhs from Hindus. The presence of the Guru was recognized in the *Ādi Granth*, and in any gathering of five Sikhs. One could frequently hear *Wāhgurūjī kā Khālsā* and *Wāhgurūjī kī Fateh*. For Cunningham as much as for Malcolm, the Sikhs were distinct from Hindus. If anything, Cunningham is more emphatic about the predominance of Khalsa identity among the Sikhs. This perception, adds McLeod, is strongly supported by the contemporary Sikh literature.<sup>15</sup>

The *gurbilās* tradition extended well into the nineteenth century. Even if we leave out Koer Singh's *Gurbilās Pātshāhi Das* and the anonymous *Gurbilās Chhevin Pātshāhi*, we have the works of Bhai Santokh Singh and Ratan Singh Bhangu, both of which appeared in the 1840s. Bhangu's *Panth Prakāsh* vigorously affirmed the distinctive nature of the Khalsa identity and claimed that this was the identity which Guru Gobind Singh had intended his followers to adopt. McLeod is inclined to look upon Gian Singh's *Panth Prakāsh* and his *Tawārīkh Gurū Khālsā* as a kind of extension of the genre. In any case, his works can be regarded as examples of 'the sustained predominance of the Khalsa identity', an identity which for McLeod extends from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth and 'onwards to the present day'. Cunningham was familiar with the *Rahitnāmas* of Bhai Nand Lal and Bhai Prahlad Singh. Two major works appeared in the early decades of British rule in the Punjab: the *Prem Sumārg* and the *Sau Sākhiān*. Both these works were popular among the Nāmdhārīs who, as McLeod points out, emphasized the importance of Khalsa identity. Whatever the strength of the Sahajdhārīs, it was

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14. W.H. McLeod. *Who is a Sikh?*, 62-63.

15. *Ibid*, 66.

demonstrated for McLeod not by the Udāsīs but by the Nirankārīs and the early Nāmdhārīs.<sup>16</sup>

Oberoi's view of Sikh tradition in the early nineteenth century is radically different. He refers to it as 'Sanatan' Sikh tradition and believes that it displaced the eighteenth century Khalsa tradition. This new tradition had begun to emerge in the late eighteenth century, and remained dominant in the nineteenth century. For the present, however, we propose to confine our discussion to his treatment of the early nineteenth century. It may be helpful to avoid as much as possible the term 'Sanatan' in this discussion to grasp the substance of Oberoi's hypothesis.<sup>17</sup>

Oberoi starts with the texts. According to him the *Dasam Granth* was held at par with the *Ādi Granth* as a devotional text. The bulk of this text related to the Goddess, twenty-four *avtārs* of Vishnu, seven of Brahma and two of Rudra. These materials came from the *Purānas*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. With its inbuilt appeal for diverse identities, the *Dasam Granth* was 'a wonderful vehicle' to reconcile 'Khalsa/Sahajdhari paradox'. It became a 'great code'. Furthermore, the *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* recommends that his readers pay the same attention to Puranic literature as they would to the *Ādi Granth*, views Guru Gobind Singh as a reincarnation of Vishnu, and makes the Guru prophesy that there would be ten more manifestations. Bhai Santokh Singh views Guru Nanak as an *avtār* of Vishnu, and maintains that he accepted the Vedas as authoritative. In the *Gurbilās Chhevin Pātshāhī*, Guru Hargobind is portrayed as the twenty-fourth reincarnation of Vishnu. The implication is clear: all these authors subscribed to the idea of incarnation, recognized texts other than the *Ādi Granth*, and looked upon the *Dasam Granth* as equally authoritative. They represented the 'Sanatan' worldview. From belief in *avtārs* to the worship of images was only a small step. But Oberoi does not clarify when images were installed in the Sikh shrines.<sup>18</sup>

The impact of the 'great code' on Sikh consciousness is seen by Oberoi in the exposition of the Japji by 'an enigmatic figure by

16. *Ibid*, 65 & 67-68.

17. Harjot Oberoi. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 92-93.

18. *Ibid*, 93-110 & 102-103.

the name of Anandghan'. Oberoi quotes his exposition of *sat nām kartā purakh* to illustrate his point. Anandghan relies on Puranic literature to back his interpretation. He does not feel the need of turning to the works of the Sikh Gurus for understanding Sikh ideology. Indeed, *gurbāñi* is no longer central to the attainment of liberation. Besides Anandghan, 'tens of thousands' of people picked up this message from the 'geat code'.<sup>19</sup>

Anandghan's religious identity is not known. In Oberoi's terminology, he would be a Sahajdhārī. Oberoi also refers to 'the Khalsa framework' acknowledged by 'Sanatan Sikhism'. The Khalsa were expected to follow the *Rahitnāmas*, and not 'the Brahmanical codes'. Theoretically, they were obliged to give up the caste system, but in practice they may have found it hard to reconcile their religious injunctions with the social reality.<sup>20</sup> Oberoi says nothing more about the 'Khalsa' in the early nineteenth century. Who were they? and where were they? and how were they different from 'the Singhs' who could be seen everywhere? Is he referring to the Akalis and the Nihangs? Oberoi thinks that he has satisfactorily delineated Sanatan conceptions of 'scripture, myth, doctrine, self definition and social practice'. But the reader may not feel satisfied with this delineation. It is not clear.

Oberoi turns to agencies through which Sanatan tradition was transmitted. This task was performed by three kinds of men: members of Guru lineages, holy men, and traditional intellectuals. Prominent among the descendants of the Gurus were Sodhis and Bedis, the descendants respectively of Guru Ram Das and Guru Nanak. Oberoi refers especially to the Sodhis of Anandpur. The information he provides relates to the late eighteenth or the late nineteenth century, but not to the early nineteenth. The name Nahar Singh, Udai Singh, Khem Singh and Chaur Singh suggest that these individuals had joined the Khalsa in the eighteenth century. The information on the Sodhis of Har Sahai and Kartarpur also comes from the late nineteenth century. We know, however, that Sodhi Wadbhag Singh of Kartarpur was the first successor of Dhir Mal to be admitted to the Khalsa order in the late eighteenth century.

19. *Ibid*, 100-102.

20. *Ibid*, 108.

The Sodhis enjoyed large *jāgīrs* in the early nineteenth century, but there is no information on what they believed and practised. The Bedis shared eminence with the Sodhis and enjoyed large *jāgīrs*. The most celebrated Bedi of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was Sahib Singh. Significantly, he was the first ‘Singh’ in the family. Like several others, he appears to have joined the Khalsa order in the second half of the eighteenth century. He was greatly respected by Ranjit Singh and received large *jāgīrs* from him. Sahib Singh’s experience was shared by some others Bedis but none of them was equally eminent. Again, we know nothing about the religious role of the Bedis during the early nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Close in rank to the Guru lineages in ‘the sacred hierarchy of the Sikh community’ were holy men known as Bhāīs, Sants or Bābās, like Bhai Bir Singh, Bhai Mahraj Singh and Bhai Ram Singh. They were known for their piety and their understanding of the *Ādi Granth*. Miracles were attributed to them, but they did not claim such powers. Their blessings were prized. Some other Bhāīs mentioned by Oberoi are Sant Singh, Ram Singh, Gobind Ram and Gurmukh Singh. All of them were important individuals. But there is no information on their ideas or attitudes. ‘Perhaps the most creative and institutionalized among the three groups upholding, interpreting and transmitting Sikh tradition were the traditional intellectuals’. This category included the Udāsīs and the Nirmalās; Giānīs; Granthīs; Pujārīs; Dhādīs, Rabābīs and Ardāsiās. While there is some information on the Udāsīs in the early nineteenth century, there is very little on the Nirmalās. Oberoi’s information on the latter comes from the second half of the nineteenth century. ‘The other half of the traditional intellectuals included granthis, pujaris, dhadis, rababis, ragis, gianis, and bhais – a sort of sacred support staff that performed different functions for the body of the Sikh believers’. The *giānīs* and *bhāīs* ran educational institutions. Out of their ‘collective learning and wisdom’ emerged Bhai Santokh Singh who was a distinguished student of Giani Sant Singh.<sup>22</sup> This is all that Oberoi tells us about

21. *Ibid*, 108-16.

22. *Ibid*, 116-36.

the transmitters of the Sanatan Sikh tradition. And there is nothing about what they transmitted. Information on this last point comes from the late nineteenth century. Oberoi likes us to share his unquestioned assumption that what was true of the late nineteenth century was true also of the early nineteenth.

Sanatan Sikhism, for Oberoi, 'deeply transformed Sikh thinking and religious practices'. But very little information is actually given by him on its 'thinking', or its 'religious practices'. He goes on to add that the Khalsa/Sahajdhārī duality now became firmly enshrined within the 'great tradition'. 'Sahajdharis' were not merely tolerated; like the Khalsa, they also controlled Sikh shrines and articulated theology, mythology, and 'in short the entire framework of their tradition'. Who are his Sahajdhārīs? The only important category known to Oberoi in the early nineteenth century is that of the Udāsīs. Are these Sahajdhārīs in fact Udāsīs? In any case, if the Sahajdhārīs and the Khalsa formed the two components of the Sikh Panth, who were the Sanatan Sikhs? For Oberoi, Sanatan Sikhism was primarily a 'priestly' religion. A critical distinction was made between religious intermediaries and the lay people. All Sikhs required formal initiation, either through *khande kī pahul* or through *charan amrit*, and this came to be given by religious intermediaries. Furthermore, all distinguished religious specialists were regarded as *gurūs*. Even Sikh chiefs and rulers are known to have prostrated themselves at their feet to seek blessings. These observations are not supported by evidence adduced by Oberoi. In any case, Sanatan tradition was primarily 'the religious universe' of the Sikh elites. In other words, it was the outlook of a small minority.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, in Oberoi's presentation the early nineteenth century was marked by what he calls the Sanatan 'episteme' which replaced the eighteenth century Khalsa tradition. The *Dasam Granth* became the 'great code' and its impact was reflected in the works of writers like Koer Singh and Bhai Santokh Singh. But their evidence is used by Oberoi rather selectively. Koer Singh, for example, underlines the importance of the line of succession from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. He looks upon the

23. *Ibid*, 137-38.

institution of the Khalsa as the most momentous development in Sikh history, which ensured the establishment of Sikh rule. He emphasizes the necessity of following the Khalsa *rahit* which was promulgated by Guru Gobind Singh himself. Koer Singh is explicit on the point that Guru Gobind Singh rejected the *Dasam Granth* in favour of the *Ādi Granth* for bequeathing Guruship to the scripture. He refers to the *Ādi Granth* as Guru-Granth. The doctrine of Guru-Panth was equally important for Koer Singh.<sup>24</sup> To refer only to what he says about the Puranas or incarnation is to misconstrue his basic position. Since Koer Singh subscribes to the essential doctrines of the Khalsa, his other ideas can be treated as actually marginal. In other words, in dealing with writers like Koer Singh and Bhai Santokh Singh it is more appropriate to place them within the Khalsa rather than a new tradition. Oberoi is left with the evidence only of the 'enigmatic' Anandghan. If he was an Udāsī, Oberoi remains confined to the Udāsīs for the early nineteenth century. He does catalogue the transmitters of Sikh tradition in the early nineteenth century and points out their importance. But they were invariably 'Singh', and there is no information on what they transmitted. Furthermore, Oberoi talks less of the Khasla and more of the Sahajdhārīs in the early nineteenth century. Who represented Sanatan Sikhism? The earliest known evidence on the composition of the Sikh Panth leaves little doubt about the numerical superiority of the 'Singhs' who dominated almost all walks of life among the early nineteenth-century Sikhs. Did they represent Oberoi's Sanatan Sikhism? If so, Oberoi does not tell us how. His whole hypothesis of Sanatan Sikhism in the early nineteenth century appears to be vague and vacuous.

## V

One dictionary defines 'identity' as 'essential or practical sameness'. This definition rules out homogeneity. We have to look for some shared traits of belief or practice which distinguished the Sikhs from others around. Since 'identity' acquires meaning only in relation to others, diversity within the Panth by itself remains rather irrelevant for distinct identity.

24. Koer Singh. *Gurbilās Pātshāhī* 10 (Pbi). Ed. Shamsher Singh Ashok. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1968, 19, 57, 129-30, 138, 238.

Paradoxically indeed, internal differentiation can be seen as leading to greater awareness of boundaries and a heightened consciousness of identity. Guru Angad did not look upon Sri Chand, the elder son of Guru Nanak, as a genuine guide because he had not received 'the gift' from Guru Nanak. The position of the sons of Guru Angad who did not recognize Amar Das as the Guru, and that of the sons of Guru Amar Das who did not recognize Ram Das as the Guru, was essentially the same as that of Sri Chand. Belief in the line of succession from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh through appointment by the reigning Guru became a cardinal belief among the majority of the Sikhs by the time of Bhai Gurdas. That was why the Minas, the Dhir Mallias and the Ram Raiyas were looked upon as 'untrue' or 'false'. Their deliberate excommunication by Guru Gobind Singh was the culmination of consciousness about boundaries.

The consciousness of distinct identity among the Sikhs was related as much to the objective socio-cultural realities of the Panth as to its ideal norms. Guru Nanak used his own compositions for congregational worship. Coupled with his statements on the existing scriptures, this fact obliges us to see the nucleus of the *Ādi Granth* in the *bañī* of Guru Nanak. The Sikh scripture was authoritative despite its diverse authorship because it carried the seal of the Guru's approval. In no other socio-religious group of India we have anything close to the Sikh doctrine of Guruship. The adoption of Gurmukhi script for the scripture made it all the more distinct. It contained the doctrine of the unity of God, an uncompromising monotheism in which there was no room for incarnation or idol-worship. The scripture provided an alternative to the living Guru to ensure the continuity of Guruship after Guru Gobind Singh. The institution of *dharamsāla*, the sacred space for the Sikhs, with its twin institutions of congregational worship (*sangat*) and community meal (*langar*), was a unique institution. Its comparison with any other institution of the times would be superficial. Some of the sacred space connected directly with the Gurus became centres of pilgrimage which provided prominent markers of distinction. The change from '*dhamasāla*' to '*gurdwāra*' greatly enhanced the sanctity of the institution.

According to Bhai Gurdas, the rite of *charan pahul* for initiation was introduced by Guru Nanak as a mark of starting a new Panth. If there was any ambiguity about the significance of this rite it was removed by Guru Gobind Singh by introducing *khande kī pahul* which is regarded as the unique form of initiation in the whole of Indian history. Other rites referred to as life-cycle rituals were introduced, perhaps gradually, from the time of Guru Amar Das. In the *Rahitnāmas*, in any case, the ceremonies to be observed at the time of birth and death are clearly stipulated. It is quite probable that the *Ādi Granth* had come to figure in the marriage ceremony during the eighteenth century. Was the Anand ceremony advocated by the Nirankāris before the advent of colonial rule in the Punjab an innovation? How is this to be explained, particularly when we know that the Nirankāris were actually Sahajdhārī. What is perhaps even more important for its bearing on identity is the *Rahitnāma* injunction to choose a Sikh bridegroom. The boundary is clearly drawn.

There is ample evidence in support of matrimony on caste lines. However, it was nowhere laid down that intercaste marriage was forbidden. Within the sacred space there was no restriction on commensality, as there was no restriction on admission to congregational worship. Even outside the sacred space during the eighteenth century, the Khalsa excluded from commensality only the individuals with the 'untouchable' background. This meant inclusion of all the 'shudras'. Even the exclusion of 'untouchables' infringed the norm of equality enunciated by the Gurus. In a changed situation, this practice could be, and was, questioned. Distinctions based on caste background were there among the Sikhs but there was no sanction. What is relevant for our purpose, the principle of inequality stood rejected. On the whole, thus, the Panth of Guru Nanak possessed a distinctive identity that was based on objective realities as well as cherished norms. This identity was visibly sharpened by the institution of the Khalsa. Singh identity was the predominant Sikh identity at the beginning of the Singh Sahba Movement.

The issue of diversity within the Sikh Panth has several dimensions. The first question to be asked in this connection is related to the interpretation of the 'mission' of Guru Nanak (and

his successors), by an individual or a group of individuals. There could be competing interpretations, but interpretations of 'Sikhism'. The splinter groups of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries failed in the competition not simply because they could not muster large numbers but also because their interpretation of the Sikh movement was relatively restricted. The Khalsa of the eighteenth century was more important than any other group of Sikhs not because of their numbers but primarily because of their interpretation of the legacy of the ten Gurus. The Khalsa acceptance of the Sahajdhārīs as a part and parcel of the Sikh Panth can be seen as cosharing of the early Sikh beliefs and practices in a large measure. The other 'Nanak-Panthīs' and the Udāsīs remained distant from the Khalsa in direct proportion to their distance from the legacy of Guru Nanak and his acknowledged successors. There is enough evidence available to the historian today to make a 'comparative' assessment. A false sense of neutrality can in fact result in partisanship.

As in the case of groups so in the case of individuals, the norms of belief and practice were not followed to the same degree in every case. Much depended on the degree of accessibility to the normative, and its acceptance. The social background of the individuals remained relevant for relative diversity or uniformity. The process of dissemination itself was related to the given means of communication. Religious ideas and rituals did not cover an individual's life in all its detail. The areas of life which did not infringe the accepted norms can be seen as neutral areas which could be shared even with non-Sikhs. Therefore, diversity in itself cannot be regarded as negation of identity. Eventually, the numbers counted. There is hardly any doubt that by far the large majority of the Sikhs identified themselves as Singhs in the mid-nineteenth century. The Sahajdhārīs who did not infringe the basic norms of belief and practice were seen as an integral part of the Sikh Panth. They were thus included in the 'Khalsa' tradition, but not the other Nanak-Panthīs or the Udāsīs. To talk of multiple identities among the early nineteenth-century Sikhs is to resurrect non-entities.

# 3

## THE SINGH SABHA MOVEMENT

For Harjot Oberoi, the Singh Sabha Movement proved to be ‘a rupture’ in relation to ‘Sanatan Sikhism’. We have noticed already that his evidence on Sanatan tradition comes largely from the late nineteenth century, particularly if we wish to know something of ‘Sanatanist’ ideas and attitudes. We may turn to this evidence first.

### I

Oberoi tells us that in a public lecture at Guru Ka Bagh in Amritsar, Gulab Singh referred to the Sikh faith as ‘the true Sanatan religion’. For him, the four Vedas were also the religious books of the Sikhs. Giani Gian Singh backed his statement of *gurmaryāda* with ‘extensive proofs from the Vedas’. Avtar Singh Vahiria debated doctrinal issues with reference to ‘Gurbilas, the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Epics in the same breath’. He counted Guru Nanak among a long line of *avtārs* who are born out of Brahma and are again united with Brahma after finishing their earthly mission. He expected a Sikh to show the same allegiance to the descendant of a Guru as to the ruler. In his view, any person who accepted the teachings of Guru Nanak qualified to be a Sikh. That the Sahajdhārīs were regarded as a part of the Panth is evident from a work sponsored by Sodhi Narain Singh and written mostly by Avtar Singh Vahiria who subscribes elsewhere to the Brahmanical paradigm of *varnashrama dharma*. Oberoi quotes from the manual sponsored by Sodhi Narain Singh to the effect that ‘the untouchable groups’ among the Sikhs were to be regarded as agents of ‘pollution’ by the Sikhs of all other castes from the Brahman to the Nāī or the Jhīwar. It was due to this purity-pollution polarity that the Sikh ‘untouchables’ were barred entry into the major Sikh shrines. The acceptance of the theory of *varnashrama dharma* gave ‘a logical place’ to the Udāsīs within the ambit of Sikh tradition, legitimizing

asceticism. Oberoi also points out that images were allowed to be worshipped within the precincts of the Golden Temple and the Akāl Takht.<sup>1</sup>

About the practices of the Sanatan Sikhs, Oberoi refers to the Sodhis of Anandpur receiving the obeisance of the people and accepting offerings from them at the time of the Holi festival. The *pothī* and *mālā* in the possession of the Sodhis of Har Sahai, which were believed to have come down from Guru Nanak, attracted people to the place at the time of the Baisakhi fair every year so that they could pay homage to the sacred relics of the Guru. The Granth Sahib in the possession of the Sodhis of Kartarpur was revered in a similar fashion by princes and the common people. Not only the Sodhis but also other representatives of the Guru lineages established *guru-sikh* relationships with a large number of clients. For eminent writers, Oberoi cites a few examples of Nirmalās rather than Udāsīs, the most notable being Pandit Tara Singh Narotam who wrote on Sikh theology and scriptures. In his *Gurmat Nirnay Sāgar*, published in 1878, he developed an elaborate theological statement of 'Sanatan Sikhism' based on the compositions of the Gurus. Giani Giān Singh received his formal training and instruction from Pandit Tara Singh Narotam. Sant Atar Singh was educated at a Nirmalā establishment. Atma Singh, a Nirmalā scholar of Amritsar, was associated with Ernest Trumpp in his project of translating the *Ādi Granth*.<sup>2</sup>

The longest chapter in Oberoi's book is on Sikh participation in 'popular religion'. In his view, the popular form of religious expression 'worked out a comfortable relationship' with Sanatan Sikhism. His primary concern is to break the 'stony silence' on the popular side of religious practice among the Sikhs. His evidence comes largely from the critics of these practices, the Tat Khalsa, though he mentions the voluminous records of the Raj, and court chronicles, particularly in Persian. The objects of worship in popular religion were Sakhi Sarwar, another pīr called Gugga, the *devī* (goddess) under many different names, especially Sītala Devi, the sainted dead, Khwaja Khizr, village godlings, the sun, the earth,

1. Harjot Oberoi. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 102, 103, 104 & 105-08.

2. *Ibid*, 11-13 & 126-30.

and sacred trees. Then there was belief in evil spirits, witchcraft, sorcery and magical healing, involving a number of practices based on that belief. Similarly, belief in astrology and divination was quite common. The festivals like Baisakhi, Diwali and Holi were celebrated by Sikhs as much as by others. There were monthly festivals timed according to the different phases of the moon, like *pūranmāshī* and *sangrānd*. A closely related theme was that of fairs (*melas*) held in honour of persons as well as gods and goddesses. The intermediaries in popular religion, like its objects of worship, were also different, consisting of *pīrs*, *bharāīs*, *mirāsīs*, *ojhās* and *siānās*.<sup>3</sup>

Oberoi notices the disapproval of popular religion by certain individuals and groups. The author of the *Gurbilās Chhevin Pātshāhī*, written in the early nineteenth century, tells his readers that they should not visit non-Sikh places because heaven can be attained by bathing at Sikh religious centres, and that those who were afraid of the messengers of death should seek to breathe their last at the Golden Temple. Readings from the Sikh scriptures as well as pilgrimage to Sikh shrines could lead to fulfilment of wishes for male progeny, cure against fevers, and the like. The idea was to discourage Sikhs from going with such expectations to non-Sikh places or persons. The author of the *Sau Sākhī* tells the readers not to worship Sitala Devi to seek cure from small pox, not to partake of offerings made to her, and not to participate in the practices associated with the cult of Sakhi Sarwar. The supposed ends of magic and witchcraft can be attained by relying on Sikh sacred scriptures, especially when combined with *hom*. Baba Dayal, the founder of the Nirankārī movement, insisted on constant reading of Sikh sacred texts and remembrance of the divine name in a manner that carried implicit disapproval of the magical universe of popular religion. The Namdhārīs or Kūkās were aggressively explicit on the point: they started desecrating, demolishing and destroying village shrines and sacred ancestral sites in the countryside. They also destroyed some tombs and places sacred to Hanuman and Lakshman. Oberoi goes on to make the point that even the Kūkās, like the other critics of popular religion, betrayed

3. *Ibid.* 139-90.

the impact of Sanatan modes of thought in suggesting alternatives.<sup>4</sup>

Oberoi is conscious of the obligation to show the ‘relationship’ of popular religion with his ‘Sanatan “great tradition”’. There were dissimilarities between the two. Whereas the Sanatan categories of thought and behaviour were influenced by texts, both Sikh and non-Sikh, popular religion was independent of texts of any kind. The Sanatan tradition was mainly an urban phenomenon; popular religion belonged to the countryside. Despite such dissimilarities, these two forms of religious expression seem to have worked out a comfortable relationship. The best examples in Oberoi’s view come from the area of goddess worship. When Fateh Singh Ahluwalia was afflicted with smallpox as a prince, the royal family of Kapurthala arranged for the worship of Sitala, and held a thanksgiving ceremony in her honour when the prince was cured. Raja Fateh Singh and Maharaja Ranjit Singh together undertook pilgrimage to Jwalamukhi, and performed all the religious rites at the shrine of the goddess, ‘a sister of Sitala Devi in popular mythology’. Ranjit Singh gifted large amounts of money to the shrine and had its roof gilded. Karam Singh, the ruler of Patiala, built a temple for Mansa Devi at Kalka. These examples do give indication of what Oberoi has in mind when he talks of relationship between popular religion and ‘Sanatan Sikhism’, but they come from the early nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

## II

Oberoi looks upon the leaders of the Singh Sabha established at Amritsar in 1873 as representatives of the Sanatan Sikh tradition. He argues that Sikhism was not in ‘a state of decline’ after the British annexation of the Punjab (or in the early nineteenth century). For him, ‘quality’ in matters religious is ‘a very relative concept’ and the historian can do well without quantifying it. There was no decline in Sikh numbers either. This was a myth created by the British and perpetuated by the Tat Khalsa. Actually, when they talked of ‘decline’ they were merely referring to prevalence of Sanatan Sikhism. J.D. Cunningham is witness to the vigour of the Sikh faith in the mid-nineteenth century. This argument is linked

4. *Ibid.*, 190-201.

5. *Ibid.*, 201-03.

with Oberoi's understanding of the Singh Sabha.<sup>6</sup>

According to Oberoi, traditional intellectuals, holy men, and other religious figures among the Sikhs were hit adversely by the policies of the British administrators of the Punjab who regarded these established representatives of the old order as parasites. The aim of displacing them was pursued by withdrawing revenue-free grants of land, enacting new laws, and discriminating against indigenous education. This policy changed after 1857, but by then the damage had been done. 'Never again would the Sikh sacred hierarchy exercise the great cultural, political and economic leverage which it had once done in such ample measure under the Lahore state'. They settled for a cautious cultural dialogue with the new order. The Raj and the Church advanced side by side in the Punjab, and this "evangelical entente" appeared to present a grave threat. A son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a Sikh *granthī*, and a nephew of the ruler of Kapurthala were converted to Christianity. The Christian missionaries employed a two-pronged strategy to propagate the gospel effectively: publishing evangelical literature in the vernacular and opening mission schools. The British administrators were equally keen to introduce social reform. The practice of female infanticide, which was prevalent among the Bedi and Sodhi Sikhs, the Brars of Ferozepore and the Khatri's of Gujranwala, was successfully eliminated by the 1870s. To avoid the impression of direct interference with indigenous customs, the British administrators encouraged the Punjabis themselves to undertake reform. The most important association for this purpose, the Anjuman-i Punjab, was founded in 1865. It had a great impact on Sikh society. It proved to be the training ground for the leaders like Khem Singh Bedi, Attar Singh Bhadaur, and Professor Gurmukh Singh. The Punjabis founded their own associations, following the example of the Brahmo Samaj in which Dyal Singh Majithia played a very prominent role.<sup>7</sup>

In this general atmosphere of reform, the immediate occasion for the founding of the Singh Sabha at Amritsar was provided by the declared intention of a few Sikh students of a Christian mission

6. *Ibid.* 207-16.

7. *Ibid.* 216-35.

school to convert to Christianity. Fear of the penetration of Christian influence in the young generation induced a Sikh aristocrat and a Sikh *gīānī* to convene a meeting of leading public figures and traditional intellectuals among the Sikhs. Prominent among the participants were Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Kanwar Bikrama Singh, Giani Gian Singh, Bhai Bur Singh, Bhai Agya Singh Hakim, Bhai Amar Singh and Giani Hazara Singh. They decided to institute the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Amritsar. It had a democratic constitution as a registered body, with provision for elected office-bearers. But it remained in the control of a small group of men: Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia, Raja Bikram Singh, Baba Khem Singh Bedi, and Kanwar Birkarma Singh. They were supported by several *gīānīs* and *bhāīs*. Prominent among the intellecutals of the Sabha were Giani Hazara Singh and Avtar Singh Vahiria. Four decades after the founding of the Singh Sabha, Avtar Singh Vahiria liked to believe that its purpose was 'to safeguard the ancient customs, rites and rituals of the Sikh community'. The first publication sponsored by the Sabha, Gian Singh's *Srī Gurpurab Prakāsh*, published in 1885, narrated the biographies of the Sikh Gurus and listed the day, month and year of birth and death for each of them. Sardul Singh, Giani Gian Singh's son, published biographies of Guru Angad and Guru Amar Das. Giani Badan Singh prepared an exegesis of the *Ādi Granth* in Gurmukhi under the patronage of the rulers of Faridkot. Started initially in response to Trumpp's *Ādi Granth*, it took more than twenty years to appear in print as *Srī Gurū Granth Steek* in 1905-06 in three volumes. The fourth volume appeared still later. It was superseded by other commentaries in a few decades.<sup>8</sup>

The ideas and attitudes of the leaders of the Amritsar Singh Sabha were reflected in its monthly magazine *Srī Gurmat Prakāshak*. All those who believed in the sanctity of the Sikh Gurus and the *Ādi Granth* were Sikhs. The Sahajdhārīs were qualified to be Sikhs as much as the Khalsa, and no one had the right to insult them by calling them *monās*. The term *monā* was appropriate only for a Sikh who cut his hair after taking *pahul*. The low caste Sikhs were not to be given the same religious rights as the high caste

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8. *Ibid*, 235-52.

Sikhs. Sikh men could neither dye their beards nor roll them into a thick bun. The recitation of hymns not found in the *Ādi Granth* was to be discontinued. New questions were being posed and new issues were being raised. The leaders of the Amritsar Sabha were poorly equipped to face the rapidly changing cultural milieu. Radical change was not on their agenda. They were rooted in the Sanatan Sikh tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Oberoi comes to the conclusion that the Sanatanists recognized the existence of several traditions within the Sikh Panth and accepted multiple sources of authority. This view of the world made it possible for the Sanatan Sikh tradition to accommodate the conflicting beliefs of folk Sikhism and to coexist with diverse elements from popular culture. This pluralistic attitude, a sort of inbuilt tolerance, enabled the Sanatanists to face such phenomena as dissent, social inversions, and even the total abandonment of community norms via renunciation, with great ease and grace. ‘By legitimizing “deviation” the Sanatanists not only ensured the vitality of the Panth but also significantly reduced the possibilities of conflicts with other religious communities’. As a result of not belonging to a monolithic Panth, individual Sikhs enjoyed wide religious freedoms. They had a vast terrain from which to choose their rites, rituals and beliefs. ‘This is reflected, for instance, in the fact that if a Sikh so desired, he or she could in the same year go to a khanaqah of a Muslim pir like Sakhi Sarvar in western Punjab, undertake a pilgrimage to the Golden Temple in central Punjab, and visit Hardwar to take a dip in the holy Ganges’. This sort of ritual exercise caused no ripples within ‘the Sikh sacred hierarchy’. There was little homogeneity in the social field created and supported by Sanatan Sikh tradition. In it there was a place for all individuals, types, personalities, categories, groups, and traditions. Recreation, fun, amusement and joking were an integral part of the myths, stories, and ritual practices of Sanatan Sikh tradition. This ludic element enlivened religion and encouraged innovation which enriched religious tradition. ‘In brief the ludic provided a rich resource of creativity, and as a result religion was not so much dreary and repetitive but rather lively and invigorating. It was able

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9. *Ibid*, 241-42 & 253.

to constantly renew and change itself'. The Tat Khalsa saw ample signs of 'decline' in the 'carnivalesque Sanatan tradition' which, for Oberoi, exemplifies the strength and richness as well as the actual state of the nineteenth century Sikh religious tradition.<sup>10</sup> His great appreciation for this tradition comes out despite his professed scholarly neutrality. He sounds almost regretful that the Sanatanists had to yield place eventually to the Tat Khalsa.

### III

The Amritsar Sabha was followed by the Singh Sabha founded at Lahore in 1879. More than a score of other Sabhas were founded in the five years following, and by the end of the nineteenth century the total number of Singh Sabhas exceeded one hundred. All the cities, most of the towns, and some villages of the province could boast of a Singh Sabha. Khalsa Diwans were founded to coordinate the activities of the Sabhas. Simultaneously with the proliferation of Singh Sabhas emerged a new kind of leadership. Oberoi refers to this leadership as the new elites, in preference to 'intelligentsia' or 'lower middle-class' or 'professional western-educated elements'. These elites were new not in terms of their social origins so much as in their functions and in the instruments of transmission they appropriated. They exercised domination through anglo-vernacular education and print culture. They evolved a 'sub-culture' for wider dissemination through a process which Oberoi calls 'dialogic'. In his own words: 'In nineteenth-century India there were not just Mill, Bentham and Voltaire, but also Vedas, Puranas and Granths. Many conflicting and simultaneous readings of these texts were possible, each rendition being dependent on who was reading them, in what state and with what purpose. Thus, we can best understand the sub-culture of the new elites if we recognize, to put it crudely but simply, that they were not just engaged in aping the west, but in exploring and constructing avenues to come to terms with the altered historical situation'.<sup>11</sup>

The Amritsar Sabha was no match for the Arya Samaj founded at Lahore in 1877. The Lahore Sabha was founded within fifteen months of Swami Dayanand's departure from the Punjab. The initial

10. *Ibid*, 254-57.

11. *Ibid*, 260-78.

impetus came from two teachers, Gurmukh Singh and Bhai Harsa Singh. Barely a year after the Sabha's inception, Gurmukh Singh started publishing a weekly in Punjabi, the *Gurmukhī Akhbār*, with Bhai Harsa Singh as co-editor. The Khalsa Press was opened at Lahore in 1883. An Urdu weekly of the Sabha, the *Khālsā Gazette*, began to appear in 1884 and a Punjabi weekly, the *Khālsā Akhbār*, in 1886 when the monthly *Sudhārak* was also launched by Gurmukh Singh. The other prominent leaders of the Lahore Sabha were Bhai Jawahar Singh Kapur, Ditt Singh and Attar Singh of Bhadaur. To coordinate the activities of the increasing number of Sabhas, a Khalsa Diwan was set up at Lahore in 1886. However, the success of the Singh Sabhas was not due so much to their 'organizational structure' as to the 'immense seduction their discourse held for a restless and upwardly mobile Sikh elite'.<sup>12</sup>

In the Tat Khalsa view of the world the Granth was the rightful heir of the ten Sikh Gurus, and it took precedence over all other sacred texts – the Vedas, the Gīta, the Puranas, and even the *Dasam Granth*. 'It surpassed diviners and their skills to work miracles, saints, bhais and members of the Guru lineages'. All this was possible only at the cost of the *Dasam Granth* which enshrined the 'great code' of the Sanatanists. It was gradually eased out of rituals and no longer enjoyed textual hegemony by the early twentieth century. Belief in the role of *avtārs* and conceptions of the divine in feminine terms were no longer permissible. 'The ten Gurus and the Granth became the centre of the Tat Khalsa universe'. In the early 1880s the Tat Khalsa began earnestly to reconstitute sacred space by initiating three measures: a campaign against certain seasonal fairs held within the precincts of Sikh shrines; the removal of non-Sikh icons from the Sikh sacred centres; and a strident call for the reform of temple management. It was argued that only Sikhs should decide what they did with their sacred shrines. In 1905, finally, icons stood legally removed from the Golden Temple. Oberoi thinks that in the 1880s these were novel demands because running the major temples 'had always been the prerogative of the rulers and not the ruled'. The Tat Khalsa would wage an all-out battle to push out what they saw as a corrupt and irresponsible

12. *Ibid*, 279-303.

religious establishment simply because it was Sanatan. Furthermore, there was no space for special ritual intermediaries in Sikh theology, and the Tat Khalsa took great pains to confirm that 'all Sikhs had a right over the community's sacred resources'. By directing all sacred resources into Sikh temples the Tat Khalsa made the *gurdwāras* 'Sikh corporate symbols *par excellence*'.<sup>13</sup>

The Tat Khalsa changed the equilibrium between Khalsa and non-Khalsa appearance by rigidly enforcing external symbols and codifying life-cycle rituals, consolidating the *Rahitnāma* tradition. The sanctity of the *kesh* was brought into high relief in narratives of martyrdom. Repeated emphasis on *khande kī pahul* in Tat Khalsa literature succeeded in turning baptism into the most salient of the Sikh *rites de passage*. A large number of manuals were published between 1884 and 1915 on how the life-cycle rituals were to be performed. All Sikhs were required to perform the same rituals without any reference to their caste or *birādarī* tradition. 'The Tat Khalsa were also not willing to leave death alone'. What began as changes introduced by a small minority gradually came to be accepted by the Sikh public at large. The passage of the Anand Marriage Act in 1909 boosted the Tat Khalsa position on *rites de passage*. In Oberoi's view, 1909 can be seen as a watershed in the history of 'modern Sikhism' – his study is supposed to close with 1909. Additional 'innovations' were made in dress, language, the annual calendar and dietary taboos to prove 'a distinctive symbolic universe' for Sikhs. To the evolving inventory of 'separatist symbols' were added the Gurmukhi script and the Punjabi language as exclusive emblems of Sikh identity, with perhaps the most far-reaching implication.<sup>14</sup>

The norms of the Tat Khalsa discourse were radically opposed to the prevailing Sanatan tradition and popular religion. The widespread practice of worshipping popular saints like Sakhi Sarwar and Gugga Pir came under attack. In fact all forms of popular worship became the target of hostile polemic. Village gods, local shrines, ancestral spirits, holy nature-spots, and *devīs*

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13. *Ibid*, 305-28.

14. *Ibid*, 328-351.

like the smallpox goddess Sitala were ridiculed and proclaimed to be powerless. Similarly, attendance at seasonal agrarian fairs, listening to folk songs, the singing of bawdy songs by women at the time of wedding – all these invited the censure of the Tat Khalsa. Their intolerance was matched by their disdain for customary forms of family entertainment: song, dance and music. Fasting was viewed with great hostility, particularly by men. Sikh participation in the festivals of Lohri, Holi, Dasehra and Diwali was denounced as mark of Hindu domination over Sikhs.<sup>15</sup>

The Sanatanists waged a long struggle against the increasing influence of the Tat Khalsa. Baba Khem Singh Bedi, as President of the Amritsar Khalsa Diwan, proposed that all Singh Sabhas in future should be called 'Sikh Singh Sabhas'. This could attract the Sahajdhārīs, the Nirmalās and the Udāsīs as well as the Khalsa. But he had to drop the motion at the annual meeting of the Diwan in 1884 because of bitter opposition from its radical members. In 1885, they raised objection to the use of a cushion (*gadelā*), in the presence of the Granth Sahib, by Khem Singh Bedi. The ruler of Faridkot, Bikram Singh, demanded the expulsion of the member who proposed this, but an overwhelming majority of the members supported the latter. This resulted in a split in the Khalsa Diwan.

Avtar Singh Vahiria publicized his view that Sikhs could worship Durga without inhibition. He was prepared to concede that Brahmins need not negotiate between the families of a couple to be married, but he insisted that the couple must circumambulate a fire, which amounted to rejecting the Anand ceremonial. In his view, Anand marriage was an innovation of the Nirankārīs; there was no evidence that the Sikh Gurus ever performed their marriage rituals according to the Anand procedures. He also supported the right of a bereaved family to take unburnt bones for immersion in the Ganges. In his view, the Khalsa initiation rite was not obligatory; each tradition within the ambit of Sikh experience could have its own initiatory rite. In Oberoi's view, Avtar Singh Vahiria spoke for all Sanatan Sikhs. They became the natural allies of personnel working in shrines and other sacred establishments. 'In

15. *Ibid*, 306-15.

their turn, the support staff at Sikh gurdwaras was closely aligned to Sanatan ideology'.<sup>16</sup>

In order to broadcast their ideology, the Sanatan Sikhs began to make increasing use of print culture. They succeeded in appropriating the *Gurmukhī Akhbār*, a major weekly of the Lahore Singh Sabha. Avtar Singh Vahiria began to edit and publish the *Sri Gurmat Prakāshak* in 1885. This Punjabi journal could be used to discredit the Lahore Singh Sabha and its leaders: 'For them Sri Guru Granth Sahib is merely a book and they consider the worship of Sikh gurdwaras a form of idol worship. They have no respect for Sikh Takhts and the *hukum-nāmas* issued from these takhts'. This was not all. The 'Sanatan' leadership barred radical Sikh activists from the major Sikh shrines. Gurmukh Singh, their foremost leader, was prevented from addressing a Sikh congregation at Manji Sahib, close to the Golden Temple, by the steward of the Golden Temple 'accompanied by a police sargeant'. Two decades later, in 1907, Babu Teja Singh, received a similar treatment at Damdama Sahib. The 'Sanatan' management of this shrine issued a proclamation against all members of 'the Singh Sabhas' and in favour of Nirmalās and 'the guru lineages'.<sup>17</sup>

Authoritative encyclical in behalf of the 'Sanatan Sikhs' were matched by direct action against the radicals. In 1885, when the move to expel Gurmukh Singh from the Khalsa Diwan was frustrated, he was threatened with physical violence and forced into hiding at Jalandhar. In 1887, he was excommunicated by an edict issued by Man Singh, the manager of the Golden Temple, at the instigation of Baba Khem Singh Bedi and Raja Bikram Singh. Bawa Udey Singh, a nephew of Baba Khem Singh Bedi and an employee of Bikram Singh, filed a defamation suit against Ditt Singh, a prominent leader of the Lahore Singh Sabha who edited the *Khālsā Akhbār* which was far more effective than the 'Sanatan' *Gurmukhī Akhbār*. Fined by the lower court, Ditt Singh was acquitted in an appeal, but the *Khālsā Akhbār* had to be stopped eventually in 1889. Baba Khem Singh Bedi and Raja Bikram Singh tried to revive the rump Khalsa Diwan in 1886, and Bawa Udey

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16. *Ibid*, 382-92.

17. *Ibid*, 387-92.

Singh presided over a new Sabha called Nanak Panth Prakash, but the basic strength of 'Sanatan' values came from 'Sikh personnel at the major Sikh shrines and sacred establishments'. Khem Singh Bedi was the first to declare that Sikhs were Hindu, thus entering the Arya-Sikh controversy against the radical Sikhs. He was joined in this by the rulers of Fardikot and Patiala. Avtar Singh Vahiria explained that Sikhism was like a wing within a large inn called Hinduism : 'It shared the same foundation and courtyard but had its own separate rooms and terraces'.<sup>18</sup>

According to Oberoi, the non-elite consisting of the peasantry, agricultural labour and artisans in both rural and urban areas often defied the norms sought to be established by the Tat Khalsa. Their hostility towards the Singh Sabhas was expressed through folk sayings, participation in rituals denounced by the radicals, and in festive cycles like Holi and Diwali. The opposition they expressed may not always have been systematic. As noted in contemporary sources, this opposition appears to be 'erratic, diffuse and piecemeal'. This is because of the received notions of 'what constitutes resistance'. We should look for it not merely in the field of politics but also in its everyday manifestations to become aware of 'how dominant cultural definitions are breached'.<sup>19</sup>

The Tat Khalsa triumphed in spite of all opposition from the Sanatanists and the peasantry. Oberoi tries to account for their success. The situation created by the colonial rule in the Punjab was favourable in some ways to the Tat-Khalsa. Customary social relationships were replaced by market relationships, and the *sepīdārī* system became a victim of this change. For example, the new means of communication made the customary services of the *nāis* easily dispensable. The British army authorities appreciated the Khalsa identity and insisted upon its continuance for the Sikhs who joined the army. The British civilians tended to equate the Sikhs with the Khalsa. Furthermore, they thought in terms of monolithic religious communities, obliging the Sikhs to accept the monolithic construct.

This identity could be invoked to keep 'others' out of

18. *Ibid*, 397-96.

19. *Ibid*, 397-401.

competition for jobs. The expansion of local self-government created another arena for competition. All such factors enabled the Tat-Khalsa to muster support from a much larger number of the Sikhs than the ‘Sanatan’ Sikhs could. In any case, the colonial state and its institutions played a significant role in the emergence of a homogeneous Sikh religion.<sup>20</sup>

Oberoi does not deny the relevance of the Khalsa tradition of the eighteenth century for the emergence of ‘modern Sikhism’, but he attaches much greater importance to the new factors like the colonial state and its institutions. The need of a new set of ideas and institutions to meet the challenge posed by political, economic and cultural changes brought about by the operation of colonial rule was even more important. The ‘new elites’ created a ‘sub-culture’ through a dialogic process in which new readings of the *Ādi Granth*, the *Janamsākhīs* and the *Gurbilās* literature were combined with an indigenous understanding of Western philosophy and social thought. Finally, the emergence of a corporate Sikh identity was facilitated through a dialectical process begun by similar ‘transformations in imagination, experience and cultural organization’ among Hindus and Muslims.<sup>21</sup>

Oberoi underlines the change brought about by the Tat Khalsa in the following words:<sup>22</sup>

For over three hundred years the chequered history of the Sikh movement had not generated an all-embracing definition of a Sikh. The Tat Khalsa, through a series of innovations, purges and negations, supplied this definition in less than three decades. They endowed Sikhs with their own texts, histories, symbols, festivities, ritual calendar, sacred space, life-cycle rituals, in short a meaningful universe, separate and radically different from other religious traditions. Sikhs could now confidently lay claim to being an exclusive pan-local religious community.

For Oberoi’s conception of religious identity, we have to go back to his ‘Introduction’ to the book. ‘Religious identity’ for him does not imply ‘merely the formal beliefs that distinguish a group of people’ and which may lead them to conceive of themselves ‘as distinct from the rest of the population’. Equally important is the historical process by which ‘a cohesive community of believers

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20. *Ibid*, 351-76.

21. *Ibid*, 422-24.

22. *Ibid*, 381.

comes to be produced, consolidated and reproduced through a cultural fusion of texts, myths, symbols and rituals with human bodies and sentiments'. He goes on to add that texts, myths, symbols and rituals have to be considered together, and not just one or another 'in isolation, to avoid 'questionable conclusions'.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the concepts of 'episteme' and 'praxis' are relevant for appreciating Oberoi's conception of 'rupture'. Routine and intentional activity are derived from an 'episteme', and there is a dialectical relationship between an episteme and human practice, so much so that one cannot exist without the other. 'But changed social, cultural and economic contexts can lead to a situation of praxis, potentially carrying the possibility of a historical rupture'. Such a rupture was brought about by the Tat Khalsa, and 'modern Sikhism' stands clearly distinguished not only from the Sanatan tradition but also from the earlier Sikh tradition, including the Khalsa.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV

W.H. McLeod starts with the perception of the Singh Sabha reformers that every thing was not right with the Sikhs and their beliefs and practices. They saw a threatening resurrection of Hindu tradition in the prominence given to Brahmins by Maharaja Ranjit Singh for various purposes. This had been clearly denounced by the Sikh Gurus. Hinduized ritual was being practised in contemporary *gurdwāras*, and the presence of Hindu idols disfigured the Golden Temple. The observance of caste, especially discrimination against outcastes, was another feature which disfigured the Panth: It infringed the clear intentions of the Guru embodied in the institutions of *sangat* and *langar* and in the common water for initiation. Numerous other such examples could be found in the beliefs and customs of the Sikh elite. In the villages it was often impossible to distinguish a Sikh from a Hindu, and the villagers were not even conscious of differences. They could seek favours at the tombs of Muslims *pīrs*, worship Sakhi Sarwar and Gugga. Some Sikhs cut their hair and smoked. How could such men be accepted as Sikhs of the Guru? The solution thought of by

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23. *Ibid.* 4.

24. *Ibid.* 29-30.

the Singh reformers was to purge the Panth of false beliefs and superstitions, whether Hindu or Muslim. 'Sikhs must be summoned to a genuine reaffirmation of their Khalsa loyalty'.<sup>25</sup>

The Amritsar Sabha was an elite organization concerned with issues affecting the Sikh Panth. Conspicuous amongst its founders were titled gentry, affluent landowners, and noted scholars. Particular emphasis was laid on the promotion of periodicals and other appropriate literature. British officers were invited to associate with the Sabha and matters relating to government were excluded from its range of interests. The Singh Sabha movement never lost its elite texture, but the leaders of the Amritsar Sabha were challenged by the Lahore group which proved to be much more aggressive. The Lahore Sabha attracted intellectuals with a more radical approach to the Panth's problems. They insisted on Khalsa exclusiveness, and this was eventually accepted as orthodox. The Khalsa tradition came to be regarded as 'standard' and Sahajdhārīs were accepted as 'slow-adopters'. The reformist section of the Singh Sabha movement came to be known as Tat Khalsa (the 'True' or the 'Pure' Khalsa). They were opposed by the Sanatan Khalsa. Each side had its own interpretation of the nature of Sikh tradition. The Singh Sabha Movement is generally equated with the Tat Khasla in terms of doctrinal formulation, social policy, and historiography. Prominent among the Tat Khalsa reformers were Bhai Kanh Singh of Nabha and Bhai Vir Singh. M.A. Macauliffe was closely associated with them.<sup>26</sup>

McLeod summarizes the Tat Khalsa understanding of the Sikh tradition in general and the role of the Singh Sabha in particular. He also summarizes the opposing viewpoints put forth by those who identified as Sahajdhārī Sikhs and by Punjabi Hindus who were not formally associated with the Panth. The debate was conducted in terms of whether or not the Khalsa were Hindu, leaving out the possibility of Sahajdhārī identity being treated as 'Sikh'. On both sides the historical past was manipulated to defend contemporary perceptions. Moreover, these interpretations are 'much too simple to be acceptable'. To claim that the twentieth-

25. W.H. McLeod. *Who is a Sikh?*, 60-70.

26. *Ibid*, 70-72.

century Khalsa was 'identical' with the early eighteenth-century Khalsa is to ignore 'the never-ending sequence of response which any religious group must necessarily make to changing circumstances' (unless it is 'moribund'). To insist that the Khalsa are Hindu is to ignore the self-identity of the Khalsa, their conviction that they were not Hindu. Furthermore, most Sikhs are not bothered about identity differences except in time of crisis. 'A Jat Singh knows that he is a Sikh and there, for most, the matter ends'. This is not true of Khatri, Arora and Ahluwalia castes who are interested in the debate. These are also the castes in which there was the convention of baptizing the elder sons as Khalsa. McLeod tries to clarify the point with reference to *amritdhārī* and *keshdhārī* Sikhs: they are not identical but no one doubts the Sikh identity of the *keshdhārī*. The implication seems to be that the differences of degree were looked upon as differences of kind when it came to the Khalsa Sikh and the Sahajdhārī Sikh. A critical and historical analysis must recognize 'the continuity which extends from the earliest days of the Nanak-panth to the end of the nineteenth century and beyond'. However, this would be insufficient by itself. 'The force of intervening circumstances must also be recognized'.<sup>27</sup>

McLeod appreciates Richard Fox for his attempt to understand Khalsa identity as the outcome of an evolving process in which the economic and military policies of the British are seen as necessary ingredients. McLeod looks upon the military policy of the British in its bearing on the Sikhs as 'a significant element' in the debate concerning Sikh identity from 1875 to 1925, but he does not accept Fox's hypothesis.<sup>28</sup> He is prepared to concede 'a variety of identities' in the nineteenth-century Sikh Panth, but the claim presented by Fox amounts to a serious exaggeration. 'To imply that no dominant tradition existed is to ignore the clear evidence of earlier periods. Although the Khalsa was not the sole claimant to the title of Sikh, it was by far the strongest and it carried into the British period conventions which enable us to recognize a clear connection between the Khalsa of the eighteenth century and that

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27. *Ibid.* 72-77.

28. *Ibid.* 77-79.

of the twentieth. Fox's suggestion that the "Singh identity" was selected by the British and then appropriated by a particular caste for its own class purposes is unacceptable. As a theory it is no more valid than the claim that the Khalsa identity was invented by radical members of the Singh Sabha'. To reject Fox's hypothesis is not to reject the relevance of changes brought about by the operation of colonial rule in the Punjab. There were elements other than economic and military policy in the larger colonial context: new patterns of administration, a new technology, a fresh approach to education, and entry of Christian missionaries. All these elements meshed together to produce great impact.<sup>29</sup>

The emergence of the Singh Sabha provides an important example of the impact of such elements meshing together and imparting new cultural dimension and magnitude to the movement. Most of the men who met in Amritsar and Lahore to form the first Sabhas in 1873 and 1879 came from the Sikh elite who had 'buttressed traditional status with British preferment'. They were reacting to a perceived attack on their inherited traditions, and these traditions were to be defended in whatever ways might seem appropriate. The traditions were derived from their pre-British past, reflecting the earlier acceptance of a dominant Khalsa. The chosen method of defence involved educational influence and use of available technology, and this pattern became increasingly evident as the movement progressed. Remaining loyal to the inherited tradition, the Tat Khalsa reformers began to produce definitions and to shape systems in the light of ideals and modes of thinking acquired from education and Western literature. As a result :

It was Sikh tradition, and specifically a Khalsa tradition, which they developed and glossed. To suggest that they developed a new tradition is false. Equally it is false to claim that their treatment of it can be described as a simple purging of alien excrescence or the restoration of a corrupted original. The Khalsa of the Singh Sabha reformers was both old and new. The Khalsa ideal now was distinguished by a new consistency and a new clarity of definition. The earlier features which were not acceptable were either rejected or suitably modified. Quest for distinctive rituals was initiated, and attempts were made to produce

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29. *Ibid*, 79.

acceptable statements of the *rahit*. 'An appropriate version of the Panth's history was formulated, a powerful stress was laid on the doctrine of Guru Granth, and Sikhs were exhorted to observe conventions which would proclaim their separate Khalsa identity. Prominent amongst these conventions was observance of the Five Ks. A fierce debate developed with the Arya Samaj apologists, with insistent stress on the claim that Sikhs could never be regarded as Hindus. All this time, the pressure of contemporary attitudes operated on the desire to protect traditional loyalties. McLeod illustrates this with reference to Anand Kāraj. Whether or not there were any precedents, the Tat Khalsa took it up as their ideal and campaigned for the Anand Marriage Act which was passed in 1909.<sup>30</sup>

McLeod takes notice of the Sanatan opposition to the Tat Khalsa ideology. It was only gradually that Tat Khalsa views gained ascendancy amongst the intellectual leaders of the Panth but eventually they did secure dominance within the Singh Sahba. The Amritsar Sabha continued to reflect the Sanatan conservatism of many of its early supporters but the 'philosophical initiative' passed increasingly to the Lahore group. Their strength was 'the strength of ideas and effective communication rather than that of direct political influence'. Though the Chief Khalsa Diwan, founded in 1902 to unite various Singh Sabhas, was dominated by relatively conservative landowners, they were not unwilling to advance 'the progressive cause'. The more conspicuous and influential contribution in terms of debate and publications came from the Tat Khalsa whose ideal was to promote reform through education, journalism and preaching.<sup>31</sup>

Sikh identity appeared to the Tat Khalsa to be the key issue. The debate was greatly intensified when the widow of Dyal Singh Majithia went to the Chief Court after his death in 1898 to contest his will in favour of the 'trust' he had founded. Two pamphlets entitled *Sikh Hindū Hain* were published under the name of Sikh authors. Bhai Kanh Singh presented the opposite viewpoint in his *Ham Hindū Nahīn*, first issued in Hindi in 1898. He also made an

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30. *Ibid.* 79-81.

31. *Ibid.* 82-83.

attempt to produce a coherent statement of the *rahit* in his *Gurmat Sudhākar* in 1901. This was one of several such attempts which culminated in the publication of the *Gurmat Prakāsh Bhāg Sanskār* in 1915. Though implicitly Khalsa in contents, this manual did not exclude the Sahajdhārīs altogether from its scope. Two major claims of the Tat Khalsa can be seen as gaining general acceptance: one, that Sikhs are not Hindu and the other, that a true Sikh will normally be a Khalsa. This interpretation stopped short of any claim to exclusive possession of the entire Panth.<sup>32</sup>

The British administrators who were charged with framing laws had to face the question of Sikh identity. In 1891, census enumerators were instructed to return as Sikhs all those persons who kept their hair uncut and abstained from smoking. Thus, the Keshdhārīs alone were to be treated as Sikhs. The Sahajdhārīs could return themselves as Nanak-Panthīs, or as followers of other Sikh Gurus. In 1901, sects were not included. But in 1911 it was decided to enter as a Sikh every person who claimed to be one. The category of 'Sikh-Hindu' was also permitted. No change was made in 1921. Thus, the census administrators could not go far. At the time of the elections for the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, elected members were required to wear the Five Ks. In the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925, the Sikh is defined as a person 'who professes the Sikh religion'. At the same time, the following declaration was required if any doubt arose: 'I solemnly affirm that I believe in the Guru Granth Sahib, that I believe in the Ten Gurus, and that I have no other religion'. This does not necessarily exclude the Sahajdhārīs. In theory in fact it places them at par with the Khalsa. The task of redefining the *rahit* devolved on the SGPC after the Act of 1925. Its *Sikh Rahit Maryāda* was published eventually in 1950. In it the Sikh is defined as a person 'who believes in Akal Purakh; in the ten Gurus; in Sri Guru Granth Sahib and other writings of the ten Gurus, and their teachings; in the Khalsa initiation ceremony instituted by the tenth Guru; and who does not believe in any other system of religious doctrine'. This definition implies preference for the Amritdhārī, includes the Keshdhārī, and does not exclude the Sahajdhārī. In the Delhi Gurdwara Act

32. *Ibid.* 84-86.

of 1971, the Keshdhārī Sikh is included but not the Sahajdhārī Sikh.<sup>33</sup>

## V

McLeod's discussion of Sikh identity is in consonance with his view that the only satisfactory method of treating the subject is 'to treat the tradition historically'.<sup>34</sup> He also believes that 'complex communities can never be summarized in neat, concise, unqualified terms'.<sup>35</sup> In the last chapter of his book he turns specifically to the question 'who is a Sikh?' in the contemporary context.

One essential feature which the *Ādi Granth* provides for McLeod's purpose relates to the doctrine of the divine Name. The practice of *nām simran* is the assured means of liberation from the cycle of transmigration. A definition of Sikhism or a Sikh must take into account this doctrine and this practice. In McLeod's view, no organization or individual can be treated as holding authority comparable with that of the Sikh scripture, not the SGPC, not the so-called 'High Priests', not the 'Sants', not the corporate community or the doctrine of Guru-Panth. In any case, the second feature relevant for Sikh identity is also related to the authority of the Granth Sahib. Its sanctity made the *gurdwāra* all the more a sanctified institution in which the egalitarian principles of the Panth were most effectively applied through the impartial distribution of *karāh parshād*, the convention of the *langar*, and the traditional concept of service in addition to congregational worship. Veneration for the Gurus, as embodied in the Sikh prayer (*ardās*), can be added as the third feature of Sikh identity.<sup>36</sup>

Having exhausted the domain of doctrine, McLeod tries the generic approach. He rejects the idea that Sikhs can be regarded as a distinct and separate race. The term 'nation' was used rather loosely for the Sikhs by the British. It began to attract serious attention only when the Muslim League's claim to nationhood crystallized and produced the threat of partition. Since independence it has designated the extreme version of the popular

33. *Ibid*, 87-98.

34. *Ibid*, 4.

35. *Ibid*, 121.

36. *Ibid*, 99-106.

Sikh claim that the Punjab should receive a larger measure of political autonomy. In recent years its radical exponents have dramatized the claim as a demand for Khalistan. In defence of the claim that the Sikhs constitute a separate nation can be invoked the doctrine of *mīrī-pīrī* which affirms a political role for the Panth. The claim can be more generally defended also in terms of the distinctive culture which the Panth embodies. However, they who dispute the claim of the Panth to be a separate nation insist that much of its culture is Punjabi culture and much of the Panth's tradition overlaps with the larger tradition of India as a whole. There is also the difficulty of demarcating 'a viable area' to be occupied by the Sikh nation. For many Sikhs, 'nation' is simply the equivalent of *qaum*, but it is 'a thoroughly misguided' equation. The word *qaum* does suggest a strong sense of corporate identity but its meaning is not the same as that of the word 'nation'. There are Sikhs who use 'nation' in its English connotation with reference to the Sikhs. McLeod thinks that the debate whether or not the Sikhs constitute a separate nation is likely to continue for quite some time to come.<sup>37</sup> However, since the concept of 'nation' flows from the idea of distinct identity, it does not carry us forward towards a better understanding of identity itself.

McLeod then turns to the pragmatic approach, to consider what we actually see when we scrutinize the Panth. In theory, women are regarded as equals of men in the Panth, but their actual status falls short of the theoretical claim. Their right to participate in the Panth's rituals is generally recognized, even to the extent of permitting them to sit in attendance on the Guru Granth Sahib and read from the sacred scripture in public worship. Sikhs commonly claim that their women enjoy a much greater freedom than those who belong to other areas of Indian society. This is a plausible claim and deserves to be examined. However, with the exception of a small elite of educated urban women, the place of women in the Panth is clearly subordinate to that of males. Focus is normally fixed on male identity and effective authority is exercised generally by men. It is nonetheless important that there is clear doctrinal support for equal rights within the Panth. Caste too presents an

37. *Ibid*, 106-08.

apparent conflict between doctrine, or theory, and actual practice. Willingness to eat together is general but caste is still generally observed in familial relationships and marriage alliances. Exceptions can be found but they remain exceptions. Whereas caste has been largely destroyed in ritual terms, it continues to exercise a fundamental influence on social and political life of the Panth. Whereas the doctrine expressly condemns caste, a substantial majority of Sikhs observe certain significant features of caste in practice.<sup>38</sup>

Three Sikh identities could be observed on the ground: the *amritdhārī*, the *keshdhārī* and the *sahajdhārī*. Little distinction was drawn between the first two. They who retain their hair uncut and refrain from smoking are accepted as Sikhs if they claim the identity, and 'for all practical purposes they will be regarded as Sikhs of the Khalsa'. The beard and the tobacco are the two standard tests. Once either line is crossed claims to Sikh identity will be treated as arguable. The idea that it is possible to be a Sikh without being a Khalsa has only negligible support among the Sikhs. The idea that a window may be left open for those who reverence the Guru Granth Sahib without accepting the *rahit* attracts little enthusiasm today. A substantial majority of the Sikhs either reject *sahajdhārī* identity or treat it as irrelevant. In the present situation the *sahajdhārī* identity appears to have lapsed. Khalsa attitudes towards sectarian movements are 'ambivalent'. The majority would concede that the Nāmdhārīs and the original Nirankārīs are Sikhs. A similar verdict is grudgingly conceded for the followers of Yogi Harbhajan Singh Khalsa. The Radhasoāmīs remain distinctly marginal, and adherents of the Sant Nirankari Mandal are vehemently excluded from the category of Sikhs.<sup>39</sup>

McLeod sums up the distinctive identity of the Sikhs in terms of reverence for the ten Gurus (the lineage beginning with Guru Nanak and ending with Guru Gobind Singh), the teachings of Guru Nanak and his successors concerning liberation through the divine Name, the practice of *nām simran*, veneration for the scripture itself, acknowledgement of the sanctity of the *gurdwāra* conferred

38. *Ibid.* 108-10.

39. *Ibid.* 110-20.

on it by the scripture, and recognition of the role of the *gurdwāra* in expressing the anti-caste ideals of the Gurus. To these items are added others from the legacy of Guru Gobind Singh: initiation into the Khalsa and observance of the *rahit*, including the Five Ks, and belief in the end of personal Guruship at the death of Guru Gobind Singh. Thereafter the authority of the Guru was vested in the *Ādi Granth* and the corporate community or the Guru Panth. Those who decline to accept the basic requirements of the *rahit* can still be accepted as Sikhs but only on the understanding that they are failing to discharge customary duties. Sikh history and tradition are regarded as a continuing source of guidance and inspiration. Denial of caste is one of the basic principles but continuation of caste practice is recognized as unavoidable. Those who observe caste practices are not deprived of their right to be regarded as Sikh. Women enjoy a status which theoretically is equal to that of male Sikhs in the Panth. Though most Sikhs are Punjabis, the Panth is open to any who accept its doctrines and practices.<sup>40</sup>

## VI

G.S. Dhillon proclaims his interpretation of the Singh Sabha Movement in the title of an article: 'Singh Sabha Movement – A Revival'. It was not a 'reformist movement'. In order to determine its character he suggests that we may consider four points: (a) ideology of the Sikh movement, (b) the level of its achievement in practice, (c) 'fall' if any, and (d) the changes brought about by the leaders of the Singh Sabha Movement. The first two relate to the ideas, attitudes, and institutions of the Sikh Gurus and their followers till the establishment of Sikh rule. The third relates to the period of Sikh and the early British rule in the Punjab. The fourth relates, obviously, to the Singh Sabha Movement itself.<sup>41</sup>

In his interpretation of the early Sikh tradition, G.S. Dhillon remains pretty close to the view presented by Daljeet Singh. For that reason it can be briefly stated. Sikh ideology was 'entirely new', and in its fundamentals it was opposed to all contemporary

40. *Ibid*, 120-21.

41. G. S. Dhillon, 'Singh Sabha Movement--A Revival'. *Advanced Studies in Sikhism*, 234.

religions. Guru Nanak denounced all those religious traditions which denied the unity of God; he discarded belief in gods and goddesses; and he opposed idolatry, ritualism and asceticism. He challenged the 'fanaticism' and 'hypocrisy' of the Brahmins, and the political oppression of contemporary rulers. He led a crusade against the caste system and stood against political despotism and economic exploitation. He rejected the Brahman's claim to superiority and put an end to his mediacy between man and God. He emphasized the brotherhood of man and stood for equality and fraternity among human beings. His ideal of emancipation recognized no distinctions of caste and creed. He stood for human rights and values. In his view the world was real and the purpose of life was to carry out the creative and attributive will of God. Social responsibility was an integral part of the spiritual life of the ideal man. This is an essential tenet of Sikhism and accounts for 'its distinctive and historic character, role and personality'.<sup>42</sup>

The operation of Sikh ideology can be seen in the history of the Sikhs from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. Under the first three successors of Guru Nanak we see the creation, expansion and organization of a cohesive society or Panth. With each succeeding Guru, Sikhism became 'increasingly crystallized and institutionalized' into a distinct faith and society. Guru Arjan presents a major landmark in the history of Sikhism: he compiled the scripture for the new society; he created 'a state within the state'; he sought confrontation with the empire and made the supreme sacrifice of his life. The doctrine of *miri-piri* was a corollary of Guru Nanak's path of love and sacrifice in the service of man, rejection of monasticism and asceticism, acceptance of the householder's life and responsibility, and the ideal of securing justice, equality and freedom for all men. This doctrine justified the use of force to uphold justice and righteousness, and to defend the oppressed. Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life for justice and emancipation of man. Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa to pursue the right path and to resist and undo injustice, tyranny and aggression. Four of the *panj piārās* belonged to the caste of *shudras*, a clear indication that the Khalsa were meant to obliterate

42. *Ibid*, 235-36.

all distinctions of caste and creed to create a cohesive society. The *panj piārās* initiated the Guru into the Khalsa, which was meant to demonstrate that the Guru was the Khalsa and the Khalsa was the Guru. This made Sikhism ‘the most democratic religion of the world’. The institution of *daswand* made the Khalsa a ‘self-contained’ society. The doctrine of *nāsh*, which involved ‘giving up of those beliefs, prejudices and traditions that stood in the way of the sole worship of the Supreme Being’, made complete break with the past religious systems, traditions and customs. Clearly, thus, the Khalsa was unique both in its ‘external form’ and ‘internal features’. It was meant to, and did, play a vital role in Indian history.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth century the Khalsa were politically active, fighting for survival or political power. Their number remained rather small because their activity involved risks. Dhillon does not recognize the existence of any non-Khalsa Sikhs during the eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century it became profitable to join the ranks of the Khalsa. This process had begun with the establishment of the Khalsa Commonwealth which gave opportunity to Muslim and Hindu population of the Punjab to seek conversion to Sikhism for mundane reasons. The ten or eleven lacs of Sikhs estimated to have been living in the kingdom of Ranjit Singh were not simply the descendants of the Khalsa of the eighteenth century. The bulk of them were new converts to Sikhism, and they were slow to shed some of their old beliefs and prejudices at personal, familial and social levels, including faith in local gods and goddesses, and in saints, *pīrs* and *faqīrs*. The loss of political power then had demoralizing effect. Sikh *giānīs* turned to Hindus for the employment of their talents, and started teaching their religious books. Hindu tint was given to Sikh doctrines. Sikh thought began to decline. While the Hindu converts to Sikhism tended to revert to their old prejudices, some Sikhs felt attracted to other religions, notably Christianity. Dhillon’s hunch is that more than seventy per cent of the Sikhs in the 1870s belonged to the segment which had not shed their Hindu prejudices.<sup>44</sup>

43. *Ibid*, 236-38.

44. *Ibid*, 339-40.

Another factor which accounted for this situation was the activity of some of the descendants of the Sikh Gurus who had been lavishly patronized by the Sikh rulers earlier. They started the cult of 'personal worship' and collected offerings. It was in their interest to encourage both Sikhs and Hindus to become their followers. Their proteges started propagating that the Gurus had preached the religious system of the Vedas. Notable among them were Avtar Singh Vahiria and Gulab Singh. Nevertheless, even in this situation there were Sikhs who observed the *rahit* of the Khalsa, and the Nirankārīs adhered to the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib as their sole scripture.<sup>45</sup>

The Singh Sabha made the Sikhs aware of their great spiritual and cultural heritage. By emphasizing the importance of Khalsa practices, social laws, customs and Punjabi language, the Singh Sabha leaders welded the Sikhs, once again, into an independent community, bound together by faith in the teachings of their Gurus. The key-note of the Singh Sabha was 'back to Guru Granth Sahib'. Its object was to restore the purity of Sikhism by abolishing those accretions and practices which did not stand the test of Sikh *maryāda* or the teachings of the Gurus. The Singh Sabha made no innovations in Sikh thought and practices. It was not a reformist movement. Its objective was 'revival' of the true Sikh tradition for socio-religious regeneration of the Sikh community. For this purpose it was necessary to devise a suitable strategy and to choose effective means. The new steps taken by the Singh Sabha leaders related to education on modern lines, and publication and propagation of religious literature.<sup>46</sup>

## VII

G.S.Dhillon has reviewed two of McLeod's books : one, *The Sikhs: History, Religion and Society* and the other, *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity*. The latter, in his view, does not 'differ materially' from the former. We have to consider both the reviews in order to form some idea of his evaluation of McLeod's position. Since none of these two books is confined to the Singh Sabha Movement, Dhillon's comments are not confined to what McLeod

45. *Ibid*, 241-42.

46. *Ibid*, 2411.

has said about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both the reviews are short, general and rather cursory, revealing in fact what Dhillon thinks of McLeod as a historian of the Sikhs. In his view, McLeod makes a systematic misrepresentation of Sikhism, its basic beliefs, ideals, institutions and history. His sweeping generalizations 'undermine the Sikh faith' and 'denigrate the mission of the Sikh Gurus'. More to the point is Dhillon's comment that McLeod interprets Sikhism as 'an inward looking mystical faith' which is concerned merely with 'other-worldly salvation of the soul'. McLeod fails to take note of 'the inherent dynamism, extroversion and the socio-political vitality' of the faith of Guru Nanak who, actually, laid the foundation of 'a socio-political revolution' which implied that religious life had to be lived in 'a socio-political context'.<sup>47</sup> Another basic fault of McLeod in the eyes of G.S. Dhillon is that 'he refuses to accept Sikhism as a revelatory religion'. Dhillon does not expect McLeod to become a Sikh. What he means is that McLeod challenges 'the originality' of the Sikh doctrine and tradition. Furthermore, he looks at Sikh doctrines in isolation from 'the general Sikh world-view'. That is why he asserts that militancy was a deviation from the faith of Guru Nanak. This is erroneous and misleading. A correct perspective on the institution of the Khalsa is to view Sikhism as a system in which religion is inseparable from politics. It was the 'inevitable corollary' of Guru Nanak's integrated vision in which 'the inward and the outward, the sacred and the empirical' were inextricably mixed.

On the Singh Sabha Movement, Dhillon misrepresents McLeod. He states that McLeod sees the beginning of separate Sikh identity in the Singh Sabha Movement. This is a wrong statement. A much more startling misstatement follows: 'McLeod believes that there were several Sikh identities during the period following the 1849 annexation but the Khalsa identity was promoted by the British in order to serve their vested interests. Therefore, the Singh Sabha version of the Khalsa identity should be regarded as a British creation'. It is safe to infer that Dhillon has not read McLeod with any care. Otherwise he would not have attributed to

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47. G.S. Dhillon. *Insights into Sikh Religion and History*. Chandigarh : Singh & Singh Publishers, 1991, 181-82.

McLeod what is not actually his view. Dhillon wrongly asserts that McLeod makes unwarranted attacks on the Khalsa identity.<sup>48</sup>

Denouncing McLeod in the same vein, Dhillon concludes his review of McLeod's second book by referring to him as 'Dr. Trumpp of the twentieth century'. Most of the points made in this review are the same as in the other review, but the wording is different. One additional point made is about the Jat influx which is not relevant here. Ideas are wrongly attributed to McLeod in this as in the other review.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps one clue to Dhillon's resentment against McLeod lies in his intense anxiety about 'the prevailing crisis in the Punjab'. His statement demands full quotation:<sup>50</sup>

McLeod's assault on the distinctive identity of Sikhism, either the result of shallow scholarship or some other ulterior promptings, has become the focus of attention not only of the Sikh scholars but also of Sikhs in general, whose religious sensibilities have been hurt. This has touched a very deep chord in the Sikh psyche, especially in the context of the prevailing crisis in the Punjab and the anti-Sikh propaganda being conducted by Government controlled media, both in India and abroad. One wonders if McLeod's writings could be a part of the sinister campaign started by vested interests to strike at the very root of Sikhism to facilitate its gradual absorption into Hinduism, the fate that has already befallen Buddhism and Jainism in India. Whatever be his motive, it is obvious that McLeod cannot be included in the category of genuine and objective researchers. Lacking in academic integrity, he has taken it upon himself to select or reject any opinion or evidence, without assigning any reason. He has turned into an intellectual intriguer, who has arbitrarily and ruthlessly rejected the overwhelmingly sound historical evidence supporting the Sikh tradition.

This tirade appears to spring from Dhillon's assumption of a 'conspiracy' rather than a study of what McLeod writes.

G.S. Dhillon has criticized Harjot Oberoi for his treatment of popular religion, his hypothesis of Sanatan Sikhism, and his interpretation of the Singh Sabha Movement. There is 'a major lapse' in Oberoi's methodology. He is selective in his presentation of Sikhism in the late nineteenth century and he is guilty of projecting this partial representation 'to be the integral part of earlier or original Sikhism'. This observation covers both Sanatan Sikhism

48. *Ibid*, 182-86.

49. *Ibid*, 187-93.

50. *Ibid*, 185-66.

and popular religion. Dhillon takes them up together, but we may separate his comments on Oberoi's treatment of Sanatan Sikhism from the comments on his treatment of popular religion. Oberoi is wrong in stating that 'deviance' came to be criticized for the first time in the late nineteenth century. The Guru Granth is full of hymns rejecting the spiritual character of gods and goddesses. Oberoi treats the leaders of the Lahore Singh Sabha as 'elites', but they came from humble social background. Dhillon misses the connotation of 'elites' in Oberoi's work. Nevertheless, if the Lahore leaders succeeded against the leaders of the Amritsar Singh Sabha who were politically and economically much more powerful, their success demands explanation. Oberoi misses the point that the bulk of the Singh Sabhas shifted their loyalty to the leaders of Lahore, the group of Ditt Singh, who represented 'the Singh culture better'. Indeed, that was why that group became 'the voice of the people'. Oberoi has relied mainly on the works of Avtar Singh Vahiria and Gulab Singh, who were the proteges of men like Baba Khem Singh Bedi. Their evidence does not justify the assertion that Sanatan Sikhs represented the dominant form of Sikhism in the late nineteenth century. Oberoi makes the mistake of equating the ideas and attitudes of a self-interested and affluent but a small group with the nineteenth-century Sikh tradition. In any case, the equation of Sanatan Sikhism with the 'Sikh' tradition is self-contradictory. In order to judge which movement or tradition was really 'Sikh' it is necessary to compare it with the early Sikh tradition and the norms of Sikh tradition embodied in the sacred scripture. To ignore this simple principle is to confuse 'deviations' with 'the tradition'. And this is precisely what Oberoi has done.<sup>51</sup>

About Oberoi's presentation of popular religion, Dhillon's first objection is that the Sikh worshippers of Sakhi Sarwar were no more than 3%. The worship of Gugga, Sitala and 'ancestors' was less popular than that of Sakhi Sarwar even according to Oberoi. The space devoted by Oberoi to popular religion is out of all proportion to its prevalence among the Sikhs. He is wrong in stating that criticism of popular religion began only in the late nineteenth century. Dhillon refers to four anecdotes from Macauliffe which

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51. *Advanced Studies in Sikhism*, 243, 245-46, 247-48 & 249-51.

imply the rejection of Sakhi Sarwar in the time of the Gurus. In the early nineteenth century, Ratan Singh Bhangu makes an explicit statement that the Sikhs did not believe in Sakhi Sarwar and Gugga and they were opposed to the 'Sultānis', the worshippers of Sakhi Sarwar. Oberoi uses the evidence of H.A. Rose but omits to mention his observation that 'comparatively few Sikhs are followers of Sarwar'. The Sultānis were generally regarded as Hindus in the time of Rose. In the *Khālsā Akhbār* used by Oberoi as his evidence, all the people of the Punjab, and not merely the Sikhs, are addressed. They are advised to give up the worship of Sitala, the goddess of small-pox, and to get themselves inoculated. Reference to ancestor worship among the Sikhs is cited by Oberoi only from one manual written by an army officer. Oberoi does not hesitate to assert that Sikhism is first and foremost a peasant faith. To hold this view of Sikhism is to ignore the Sikh scriptures altogether. Whatever little of popular religion was there among the Sikhs it was there in spite of the teachings of Sikhism. It was a measure of the success of the Sikh faith that there was so little of popular religion among the Sikhs. Its presence among the Sikhs did not make it 'Sikh' in any sense of the term. Many pagan customs continued in Christianity in one form or another for centuries on end, but they are not regarded as a part of Christianity. For the same reason, folktales cannot be regarded as a part of Sikhism.<sup>52</sup>

'Oberoi's basic fault' in Dhillon's view is that 'he neither defines Sikhism nor clarifies how a deviant practice forms the faith of a pluralistic group'.<sup>52</sup> Using the term 'tradition' rather loosely and incorrectly, and making no distinction between the written and the oral, Oberoi never makes any reference to the Guru Granth. He fails to see that the basic principles of Sikhism were defined by Guru Nanak who also laid the foundation of its social structure. Multiple loyalties and plurality of beliefs were out of question in Sikhism. Both the Khalsa and non-Khalsa were Sikhs, but every Sikh was not 'a member of the Khalsa till he had made the necessary commitment required by the tenth Master'. Whether a Sikh or a Khalsa, one had to have 'unalloyed loyalty to the Scripture'. On this criterion, the groups like the Udāsīs, Suthreshāhīs,

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52. Ibid, 243, 244, 245, 246-47, 248 & 258.

Sangatshāhīs, Jītmallīs, Bakhatmallīs, Mīhānshāhīs and the Sarvariās could not be regarded ‘as lying within the framework of the Sikh faith’. Furthermore, participation in fairs and festivals which were not ‘incongruous with the doctrines of the Guru’ was not barred. Oberoi’s talk of ‘multiple identities’ and competing definitions springs from his failure to appreciate these criteria of exclusion and inclusion. His assumption that Hindus and Sikhs formed one society till the end of the nineteenth century is ‘entirely baseless’. Among other things, it ignores ‘the creative institution of martyrdom’ which was practically unknown to the Indian society, and which was based on the idea of supreme sacrifice for an ideal. In fact, the ‘ideological, social, ethical and cultural separateness’ of the Sikh from the Hindu society was a creation of the first three centuries of Sikh history. It was ridiculous on Oberoi’s part to assume that ‘religion as a systematized sociological unit’ was ‘a relatively recent development’.<sup>53</sup>

Dhillon appears to visualize two categories of Sikhs. The Sikhs who were loyal to the scripture formed one category, whether Khalsa or non-Khalsa. The other category consisted of Sikhs who deviated from the spirit of the scripture. It is easy to see that the splinter groups coming down from the seventeenth century, like the followers of Prithi Chand, Dhir Mal and Ram Rai, could not have been regarded as Sikhs. Dhillon is quite explicit on the point that the Udāsīs could not be treated as Sikhs. They never joined the Sikh society because of their asceticism. They took charge of ‘the virtually vacant Sikh shrines’ when the Sikhs were fighting their political battles with the Mughals. The fact that the Mughals had no objection to Udāsī occupation of Sikh shrines was a proof that they were not looked upon as a part of the Sikh society. They became instrumental in introducing Hindu practices at those shrines. The story of Baba Gurditta, the eldest son of Guru Hargobind, becoming an Udāsī was a myth. He is not mentioned even by the Udāsī Seva Das in his *Parchiān*. Kesar Singh Chhibbar clearly records that a Sikh should never become a *bairāgī*, because Sikhism and renunciation represented two contradictory systems.

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53. G.S. Dhillon. ‘Sikh Identity : A Continuing Feature’. *Recent Researches in Sikhism*', 228-32.

The Udāsīs remained 'distinctly demarcated from the Sikh society'.<sup>54</sup>

The Singhs remained distinct from those Sikhs who are regarded by Dhillon as 'fair-weather friends' and 'converts of convenience'. Drawn largely from the Hindu society during the period of Sikh rule, they did not shed all their earlier practices. As Malcolm observed in the early nineteenth century, their character differed widely from that of the Singhs: "Full of intrigue, pliant, versatile and insinuating, they have all the art of the lower classes of Hindus, who are usually employed in transacting business from whom, indeed, as they have no distinction of dress, it is difficult to distinguish them". Malcolm also refers to Nanak-Putras, the descendants of Guru Nanak who gained favours from the Sikh rulers and continued to have Singh and Hindu followers in spite of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Oberoi makes no distinction between 'sanctioned and unsanctioned practices', and creates confusion by obliterating 'the line between cultural practices and aberrations'. Instead of seeing aberrations as what they were, Oberoi begins to treat the Khalsa as a 'sub-tradition'. There could be no question of initiation through *charan-pahul* after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. The new *gurus* who started doing this were no other than the Nanak-Putras who later appeared in the Amritsar Singh Sabha. They are seen by Oberoi as 'genuine Sikhs', and their practices are regarded authentic. He is the first author to equate them with 'Great Tradition' and to equate the Khalsa with 'little or small tradition'. Oberoi concedes that many members of the former group came from families and castes enjoying high ritual standing, and he admits that the latter came from the lower socio-economic strata. The former also enjoyed favours and privileges from their British masters, and yet the latter 'swept away the influence of the gilded gentry from among the Sikh masses'. This was because the Khalsa 'invoked the authority of Guru Granth, Sikh injunctions and the heroes of Sikh history, who had sacrificed their all to maintain the Sikh faith and its identity'. Their opponents failed because their stand was wholly contrary to the Sikh scripture and four hundred years of Sikh history. The Singh Sabha linked the Sikh community

54. *Ibid.* 232 & 240-41.

firmly with the Gurus and their religion.<sup>55</sup>

Recently, G.S. Dhillon has reviewed Harjot Oberoi's *Construction of Religious Boundaries*. The book does not 'differ materially' from the formulations of W.H. McLeod who, it is added, was an examiner of Oberoi's doctoral thesis. It is 'a motivated attempt to distort the Sikh identity' and a systematic misrepresentation of the basic beliefs, ideals, institutions and history of Sikhism. Oberoi's approach is biased, lop-sided and negative. Dhillon repeats Daljeet Singh's argument that social sciences cannot adequately handle religious studies. Oberoi's style is 'verbose' and his premises are flimsy. His perceptions seem to be typical of 'a town-bred sheltered school boy, who lacks sense of proportion and assessment'. On a more serious note, Oberoi confuses catholicity with lack of religious solidarity among the Sikhs. He ignores the evidence of outsiders on 'the clearly demarcated features of Sikh ideology and ethos'. Oberoi's assertion that communal boundaries in India crystallized only in the nineteenth century is 'absolutely baseless'. The observations made by Oberoi about Hinduism cannot be applied to Sikhism without doing violence to empirical evidence. Oberoi's view of the nineteenth century is no more correct or authentic than the view of the British proteges who managed the Amritsar Sabha and thought that they represented the Panth.<sup>56</sup>

## VIII

We may now look at the picture emerging from the discussion of the Singh Sabha Movement by Harjot Oberoi, W.H. McLeod and G.S. Dhillon. For Oberoi, the Singh Sabha consisted of two components: the Sanatan and the Tat Khalsa. The former was holding the field when the Tat Khalsa appeared on the scene to triumph despite opposition. In Oberoi's formal discussion of the Sanatan tradition, its representatives turn out to be Sodhis, Bedis and Nirmalās, and a few other individuals associated with them, notably Avtar Singh Vahiria. In their exposition of Sanatan Sikhism, Oberoi mentions their acceptance of the authority of the Vedas and Puranas in addition to the Sikh scriptures, their belief in

55. *Ibid*, 232-33, 234, 235, 237-38 & 242.

56. *Abstracts of Sikh Studies*, July 1994, 109-15.

incarnation, their acceptance of the Sahajdhārīs as equal members of the Sikh Panth, their acceptance of *varnashrama dharma* which legitimized the Udāsīs and the idea of pollution, their tolerance of idol-worship and popular religion, and their belief in living *gurus*.

Oberoi virtually ignores the presence of categories like the Nāmdhārīs and the Nirankārīs in his account of the late nineteenth-century Sikhism which, consequently, is represented by a limited number of groups. Oberoi's talk of the Sanatan acceptance of Sahajdhārīs carries the implication that the 'Khalsa' or the Singhs formed the main component of the Sikh Panth. In any case, the Sahajdhārīs had always formed the main component of the Sikh Panth. We have a curious situation in which Oberoi first assumes that Sahajdhārīs were not a part of the Sikh Panth and when he finds that they were, he infers that it was a new thing. For the idea of pollution, he himself says that this discrimination was confined to the untouchable groups and did not extend to Shudras. He appears to assume that this discrimination was not there earlier. Oberoi looks at the late nineteenth-century Sanatan Sikhism as a continuation from the early nineteenth century, but we observed earlier that he makes a weak case for Sanatan Sikhism in the early nineteenth century. His attempt to link popular religion with the Sanatan tradition does not succeed. Popular practices existed in spite of the Sikh norms. Though Oberoi talks of 'Sikhism' in relation to popular religion, he is actually talking of popular religious practices among Sikhs. Sheerly by dint of its existence, popular religion does not become a part of 'Sikhism'.

Oberoi has argued that the leaders of the Amritsar Sabha were rooted in Sanatan Sikhism. The first point which he makes in this connection is that, contrary to the myth created by the British and accepted by the Tat Khalsa, Sikhism was not on the decline in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Much of the evidence on the question of decline refers actually to the decline of the Khalsa tradition and not of Sikhism. Oberoi's argument does not carry the force which it is intended to carry. The religious elites of the time of Ranjit Singh and his successors, according to Oberoi, suffered under the British never to regain their former importance even after 1857 when the British attitude towards them changed.

This may be true but Oberoi forgets that the religious elites among the Sikhs during the colonial period were associated with the Sikh shrines and with the native princes, and they remained important as a social category. Their close association with the colonial state, the native princes and the Sikh aristocracy is noticed by Oberoi but without any comment on its significance. It is significant that the initiative for 'reform' was taken by a group of leaders who belonged to the social, religious and intellectual elites among the Sikhs – princes, aristocrats, *gurūs* and *giānīs*. Oberoi says that their objective was to conserve the tradition through reform, albeit moderate. This precisely was the professed objective of the Tat Khalsa. They differed in their view of what was to be conserved. The attitude of the Amritsar Sabha leaders appears to be rooted in their social position rather than their commitment to Sanatan tradition. Almost literally, they represented 'vested interests'. Oberoi presents evidence against his own hypothesis when he tells us that the basic tenet of Sanatan Sikhism was belief in the Sikh Gurus and the *Ādi Granth*. This would include the Khalsa and the Sahajdhārīs but not the categories like the Udāsīs. The Sanatan assertion that only they who cut their hair after baptism should be called *monā* indicates the importance of the Singh identity for them. Oberoi's assertion that the Sanatan Sikhs recognized several Sikh identities is belied by the evidence of the so-called Sanatanists: they recognized only two identities, the Khasla and the Sahajdhārī. In the light of all these observations, Oberoi's generalizations about the Sanatan tradition lose their validity. His hypothetical statement about a Sikh going to the Golden Temple, Hardwar and the shrine of Sakhi Sarwar in the same year ignores the realities of the times: hardly any one could afford to spend so much time and money, even if he had the inclination. It was almost impossible to find such a person on the ground. Finally, Oberoi's unreserved appreciation for his Sanatan tradition implies a value judgment which infringes the academic neutrality he professes to espouse.

In Oberoi's treatment of the Tat Khalsa, we may notice first that this term, like the term Sanatan, is taken over from the contemporaries at its face value. Education and print culture were the instruments of both his Tat Khalsa and his Sanatan Sikhs. Thus,

the element which was meant to distinguish the Tat Khalsa from the Sanatan Sikhs loses its significance. In referring to Tat Khalsa 'sub-culture' Oberoi gives too much importance to differences at the cost of shared beliefs, practices and attitudes. The importance given to the *Ādi Granth* was not a new thing. If there was anything new, it was the insistence on exclusiveness. Belief in the ten Gurus was an old belief, and so was the rejection of incarnation and gods and goddesses. Oberoi is wrong in stating that management of the Sikh shrines was always a prerogative of the rulers. The control and management of the Golden Temple, for example, was taken over for the first time by Sikh rulers, and that too on behalf of the Sikh Panth. In theory, whatever belonged to the Gurus earlier belonged now to the Panth. This was the claim that the Tat Khalsa put forth in opposition to the control and management of the instruments of the colonial rulers. We have noticed already the unique importance of the Sikh *gurdwāra* in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, and of the Sikh *dharamsāla* even earlier. The Khalsa merely insisted on the restoration of its former status. Oberoi has paid no attention to the control and management of sacred space in the early Sikh history. Therefore, he looks upon the Tat Khalsa attitude as something novel. He is justified in underlining the importance of the rites of passage, but according to his own presentation only the Anand marriage was an 'innovation'. Even for this, however, there was the precedent of the Nirankāris, if not actually a still earlier practice. Oberoi on the whole tends to raise differences of degree into differences of kind. Gurmukhi script was regarded as sacred by the Sikhs from the sixteenth century onwards. Punjabi was the language of much of their scriptures. When the question of scripts and languages cropped up in the late nineteenth century, it was quite natural and logical for the Sikhs to espouse the cause of Gurmukhi and Punjabi. Oberoi tends to forget the context as well as the background in his use of the label 'innovation'. His preoccupation with the concepts of episteme and praxis appears to colour his perception. He seems out to prove a hypothesis. This is the reason why in accounting for the success of the Tat Khalsa he attaches the least importance to the Khalsa tradition.

W.H. McLeod is familiar with Oberoi's work which he appreciates, but his own understanding of the Singh Sabha Movement is quite different from Oberoi's. McLeod starts with the perception of its protagonists that all was not right with the Sikhs because their beliefs and practices were not in consonance with the teachings of the Gurus and the Khalsa code of conduct. Therefore, they thought of reform. The leadership of the Lahore Singh Sabha was opposed to the leadership of the Amritsar Singh Sabha precisely because of their different understanding of the Sikh legacy. The 'Sanatan Khalsa' thought primarily of what was there in their own times; the 'Tat Khalsa' thought primarily of the earlier Sikh and Khalsa traditions. The Tat Khalsa and the Sanatan Khalsa differed in assigning relative importance to Khalsa and Sahajdhārī identities but both accepted these two categories as the two components of the Sikh Panth. In the debate about Sikh identity, however, the positions taken were : (a) that the Khalsa identity was obligatory and the Khalsa were quite distinct from Hindus, and (b) that Khalsa identity was voluntary and all Sikhs were Hindu. The third alternative that all Sikhs, whether Khalsa or Sahajdhārī, were distinct from Hindus was not posed. According to McLeod, the Sahajdhārī identity was less distinct only in comparison with the Khalsa identity. It is not easy to bracket the Sahajdhārīs with Hindus. The debate about Sikh identity ran in two channels because of the anxiety of the one party to establish Khalsa identity as the Sikh identity *par excellence* and the keenness of the other party to establish that all Sikhs were Hindu. McLeod rejects Fox's idea that Khalsa identity was one of several equally important identities. However, McLeod sees the relevance of colonial rule for the emergence of the Singh Sabha Movement. Invoking the earlier Khalsa tradition to create an identity which was both old and new, the reformers took care of both continuity and change. Once the cherished ideal of the Tat Khalsa is grasped, all their activity falls into place, including their insistence on Anand marriage. Philosophical initiative passed into the hands of the Tat Khalsa, and their strength was the strength of ideas. The Sahajdhārīs were not excluded from the Sikh Panth during the colonial period, but they were not exactly equal to the Khalsa within the Panth. In

defining Sikh identity, the official role was far less important than the role of the Singh reformers.

Treating Sikh identity as a historical phenomenon, McLeod tries to sum up his findings for the contemporary situation. In terms of doctrines, he mentions the authority of the *Ādi Granth* for the doctrine of Divine Name and the practice of *nām simran*. The sanctity of the *gurdwāra* as the most important Sikh institution was closely related to the concept of Guruship. The Sikh *ardās* implied equal veneration for all the ten Gurus in the accepted line of succession from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. In generic terms, McLeod finds no meaning in 'race', but the term 'nation' has a meaning. It seeks recognition for the Sikhs as a political community. Speaking pragmatically, McLeod mentions the ideal of equality as partially but not fully operative. He mentions three identities on the ground: the Amritdhārī, the Keshdhārī, and the Sahajdhārī. Of these three, the first two are regarded as almost of equal validity. The third, however, has lost much in comparison with its former recognition. Finally, a number of elements constitute distinct Sikh identity: belief in the ten Gurus, belief in the *Ādi Granth* as the only scripture, belief in the doctrine of Divine Name and the efficacy of *nām simran*, sanctity of the *gurdwāra* as the Sikh corporate institution *par excellence*, preference for the Khalsa *rahit* including the Five Ks, belief in the doctrines of Guru-*Granth* and Guru-Panth, acceptance of the Sahajdhārīs as Sikhs who are failing a little in their duties, belief in the value of Sikh history and Sikh tradition, denial of caste distinctions in spite of the tolerance of caste practices, equality of women with men in theory in spite of the existing differences in practice, and finally the universality of the message of Sikhism with the implication that the Panth is open to all human beings, irrespective their caste, creed or nationality.

G.S. Dhillon looks upon Sikh ideology as entirely new in Indian history, and it found clear expression in the early history of the Panth, culminating in the institution of the Khalsa. Both in its 'external form' and its 'internal features', the Khalsa order presents a clear break with the Indian tradition. During the period of Sikh rule, when large scale conversion to Sikhism swelled the numbers,

Brahmanical ideas and practices, were retained by the new entrants. Popular religious practices were also there but much less among the Sikhs than among others. This was a measure of the success of the Gurus and their followers. In the early decades of British rule, the Khalsa tradition declined in terms of numbers and doctrines. The Bedi and Sodhi descendants of Guru Nanak and Guru Ram Das played an important role in bringing about this decline. The Singh Sabha, essentially, stood for going back to the ideology of the *Ādi Granth* and the *rahit* of the Khalsa. Therefore, it should be regarded as 'a revival' of the earlier Sikh tradition and not as 'reform', and much less as 'a rupture'.

Dhillon, understandably, is critical of both McLeod and Oberoi. His criticism of McLeod is largely misplaced. It is based on a wrong reading of McLeod who, contrary to Dhillon's assertion, nowhere maintains that distinct identity was imparted to the Sikhs for the first time by the Singh Sabha. In fact Dhillon goes on to attribute to McLeod something far removed from McLeod's actual position: that the British promoted the Khalsa identity out of several Sikh identities prevalent at the beginning of their rule and, therefore, the Singh Sabha can be regarded as a creation of the British.

Dhillon seems to have read Oberoi more carefully. This may be because his own work on the Singh Sabha has been criticized by Oberoi. One objection which Dhillon raises against Oberoi is that he takes a partial view of Sikhism in the late nineteenth century and then projects it backwards in time, presenting a distorted interpretation. Dhillon regards this as a serious lapse in methodology. Oberoi forgets that the Tat Khalsa were by no means the first to denounce belief in gods and goddesses. This had been done by the Gurus from Guru Nanak onwards. The evidence of Baba Khem Singh Bedi and his associates, especially Avtar Singh Vahiria, is treated by Oberoi as evidence on the whole of Sikhism whereas they represented only a partisan view. Oberoi equates their understanding of Sikhism with the Sanatan tradition which is further equated with the Sikh tradition during the nineteenth century. In the process, periphery comes to occupy the centre of the stage. Popular religion existed among Sikhs in spite of the norms of Sikhism; its

incidence was far less than what Oberoi makes out; and it never became an accepted part of Sikhism. The Sikh Panth, according to Dhillon, consisted of the Khalsa and the Sahajdhārīs who held many common beliefs and observed many common practices. If any other group is to be regarded as a part of the Sikh Panth, it has to be proved with acceptable evidence and not by far-fetched inferences. There is no justification for treating the Tat Khalsa as representing a 'sub-culture'. Oberoi gives no reason why he does so. Finally, Oberoi is totally mistaken in seeing a parallel between what happened in 'Hinduism' and what happened in 'Sikhism'.

Despite their differences with one another on several important points, all our three authors are more or less agreed on what was done by the leaders of the Singh Sabha Movement and the revitalizing effect which their activity had on the lives of a large number of Sikhs. They brought the issue of distinct Sikh identity to the centre, making it more important than ever before. Our authors differ in their understanding of the linkages between the Singh Sabha and the earlier Sikh tradition. The difference is the widest between Oberoi and Dhillon. Oberoi's view of the Singh Sabha as a new episteme arising out of praxis precludes the possibility of any meaningful linkages with the past. What is hammered by Oberoi is 'rupture' even in its ordinary connotation. Dhillon argues that the Singh Sabha was a revival of the earlier Sikh tradition. His depiction of the movement takes it close to 'reform'. What he wishes to underline is the close links of the Singh Sabha with the Sikh past. McLeod recognizes continuity in the Sikh tradition from the time of Guru Nanak but he also notices the changes coming in from time to time. He is emphatic that the Khalsa tradition was systematized and clarified by the Singh Sabha reformers to make it consistent and effective for propagation. Ironically, McLeod's position is closer to Dhillon's on this issue than to Oberoi's though he appreciates Oberoi's work and Dhillon is critical of both.

The close connection of Singh Sabha with 'Sikh identity' makes our authors conscious of the political implications of any treatment of the Singh Sabha Movement.<sup>57</sup> One of the reasons

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57. For conjunction between Sikh identity and the recognition of the Sikh Panth as a political entity, Appendix B.

why Oberoi appreciates Sanatan tradition is its tolerance and its adjustment with differences and deviations, obviating tension with others around. By contrast, the Tat Khalsa became the source of tension within the Panth and with outsiders, resulting in the withdrawal of certain groups from the Panth, and in a running debate with the Arya Samajists and others. In fact the Tat Khalsa came into conflict with the state. Oberoi is conscious of the political implication of Dhillon's insistence on homogeneity. But he is silent about the political implication of his own interpretation, assuming it to be a work of 'pure academics'. Sikh identity for Oberoi becomes the source of tension with the state, while Dhillon holds the opposite end of the political pole: the unwillingness of the state to recognize the Sikhs as a political community is the essential source of crises. For McLeod too, Sikh identity is relevant for politics, but it is not inevitably linked with a specific form of polity.

## IX

Going back to the beginning, we can see that 'Sikh' entity began to emerge with the community of believers called the 'Sikhs of the Guru' (*Gursikh*) in the lifetime of Guru Nanak. Apart from their faith in Guru Nanak, they had faith in his *bānī* which was used for congregational worship. With the emphasis on *nām simran* was coupled the norm of remaining productive members of the society. Their own resources enabled the Sikhs to establish the community meal (*langar*) which, like the congregational worship, cut at the root of the principle of social inequality. The continuity of this core was ensured when Guru Nanak appointed a disciple to his own office, making the successor identical with the founder. Since all his successors were 'Nanak', all their followers were Nanak-Panthīs as much as the original followers of Guru Nanak. The principle of the unity of Guruship began to provide the criterion of allegiance to the Sikh Panth. The scripture and the Sangat came into parallel prominence with the Guru (leading eventually to the doctrines of Guru-Granth and Guru-Panth). Social commitment was extended to embrace politics. Sacred spaces, rites and ceremonies, and *rahit* were given tangible forms. With the increasing socio-cultural articulation of the Sikhs increased their

consciousness of self-identity. The outsiders were quick to perceive the distinction. Thus, both before and after the institution of the Khalsa, the Sikhs were seen and they saw themselves as a distinct community.

Paradoxically, the demonstrably distinct identity of the Singhs during the eighteenth century in relation to the non-Singhs among the Sikhs brought the issue of uniformity to the fore. Outsiders began to look at the Singh and the non-Singh as two different categories, underlining the differences of external appearance at the cost of their common faith in the basic doctrines of Sikhism and their participation in Panthic life. For the Sikhs, however, the Panth consisted of both the Singhs and the Sahajdhārīs. This situation began to change in the late nineteenth century when, in response to assertions that Sikhs had no identity separate from the Hindus, the Singh Sabha leaders began to treat the Singh identity as the preferable Sikh identity because of its greater visibility. But they were also close to the Sikh tradition of the eighteenth century in which the Singh identity was the preferable Sikh identity. Their eventual success marginalized the Sahajdhārīs within the Sikh Panth.

Objective realities and subjective self-image are intermeshed in a consciousness of distinct identity in relation to others in any given historical situation. As the product of these variables, identity cannot be a static or 'fixed' entity. Nor can there be objective uniformity or 'homogeneity' among all the members of a community identified as distinct from others. Neither fluidity nor diversity, thus, invalidates distinct identity. The objective realities of the Sikh Panth and the self-image of the Sikhs from the days of Guru Nanak to the present day have not remained the same, but the consciousness of distinction from the others around has remained constant. Nor did 'others' try to argue that Sikhs were 'Hindu', or 'Muslim', till we come to the late nineteenth century. However, Sikh identity gets recognized even in the self-contradictory statement that 'the Sikhs are Hindu'. If anything, this statement shows that Sikh identity was not only distinct from but also older than the emerging consciousness of 'Hindu' identity.

'Sikh identity' in the late nineteenth century began to impinge

upon the political imagination of the Sikhs as well as some ‘others’. Bhai Kanh Singh Nabha could see the political dimension of the assertion that Sikhs were Hindu. His exposition of Sikh identity was meant to show its political implication as much as its independence. The equation of the Sikh Panth with the ‘*Sikh qaum*’ made the Sikhs a political community. Sikh politics for him came to be based on Sikh identity. But he was not alone. The Chief Khalsa Diwan before and after 1920, the Shiromani Akali Dal before and after 1947, and the recent movement for Khalistan invoked Sikh identity as the basis of their politics. Sikh identity has become an issue of vital importance – positively for the ‘Sikhs’ and negatively for some ‘others’. And that makes it ‘a sensitive issue’ for the scholars of Sikhism and Sikh history. Every interpretation of the past carries its own implications for the future. Strictly as an academic issue, it is imperative to recognize the distinct socio-cultural identity of the Sikhs from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.

## Appendix A

### *DABISTĀN-I MAZĀHIB*

The dictionary meaning of *dabistān* is ‘a school’. It is used as a metaphor for a book. The dictionary meaning of *mazhab* (singular of *mazāhib*) is a creed, a sect, a set of doctrines or a set of institutes. The people who profess a creed or who belong to a sect, or who subscribe to a set of doctrines or institutes are referred to as *tabqa*, *tā’ifa*, *jamā’at*, *guroh*, *firqa*, or *panth*. These terms are used more or less as synonyms, though the meaning can differ in certain contexts. In the eyes of the author of the *Dabistān* each category taken up by him was a distinct entity. We can even say that each category of people possessed an identity of their own. Whether or not it was an independent identity is a matter for further examination.

The *Dabistān* is divided into a number of *ta’līms*, literally lessons or instructions. We may call them parts. Each part of the book (*kitāb*) is further divided into *nazars*, literally views or visions or sights. We may refer to them as sections. The second part of the book deals with the fundamentals of the various categories of people in the Indian subcontinent. However, it is entitled *dar bāz namūdan ‘aqāid-i Hinduān*. It is meant to unravel the fundamental ideas, tenets, beliefs and attitudes of ‘the Hindus’. At one level the Hindus of the *Dabistān* are the peoples of India (*ahl-i Hind*). At another level they are equated with the Brahmins (*brāhma*) and, by extension, with the people who followed the Brahmanical systems of belief and practice. Therefore the context has to be kept in mind.

The part dealing with ‘the Hindus’ is divided into twelve sections. The first three sections relate to the ‘orthodox’ (*mutasharri*) among the Hindus. They believed in the four Vedas, the four *yugas*, and the four-caste social order. They had their Shastras, Smritis and Puranas. They held the Epics in high esteem.

They subscribed to the doctrines of *karma*, transmigration, and incarnation. They worshipped idols in temples. They used the sacred thread and the sacred mark, and they performed *yagya* or *hom*. They upheld the practice of *sati*. The author of the *Dabistān* distinguishes the Vedantists from the 'orthodox' : the former sought liberation through knowledge (*giān*). Their philosophy is expounded in the fourth section. In the fifth section are discussed the ideas of the Sāṅkhians who propounded the doctrine of Prusha and Prakriti. The sixth section deals with Yoga – with the twelve *panths* of the *Jogīs* and the ten *panths* of the *Sanyāsīs* as its most conspicuous representatives. The seventh section relates to the Shaktas who worshipped the Goddess under various names, including Jagdamba and Durga. The Vaishnavas are the subject of the eighth section which takes into account the various orders of the Bairāgīs. Among them are included Kabir and Namdev. The ninth section deals with the Charvaks as the upholders of materialism. The tenth section relates to *ahl-i tark* who made logic the mainstay of their philosophy. The eleventh section talks of the Jains, called *Jatīs*. They subscribed to the doctrine of transmigration but not to the doctrine of incarnation. In fact, the *Jatīs* disapproved of the laws (*shari‘at*) of the Brahmins. We can see that these eleven sections cover a vast ground, dealing with religions and philosophies of the peoples of India.

What is implicit in the title of the second part is made explicit in the title of its twelfth section : *dar ‘aqāid-i mukhtalifa-i ahl-i Hind*. It deals with the religious principles and practices of the peoples of India other than those treated in the first eleven sections. The first category taken up in the twelfth section is that of the 'Muslim Sūfis', with their fourteen orders traced to two of the disciples of Hasan Basri, including the Chishtiya and the Suhrawardiya order. Peculiarly Indian were the Madārīs and Jalālīs. They resembled the *Sanyāsīs*. There were other categories of *fuqarā* in India (who were not Muslim). Among them were the followers of Gosain Hari Das, known as Niranjanī; the followers of Dadu, known as Dadu-Panthī; and the followers of Baba Piāra, known as Piara-Panthī. Then there were the worshippers of the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Fire, the Water, the Wind and the Earth. The last

category taken up in this section is that of the Nanak-Panthīs, also known as Gursikhs.

What we have said so far may give the impression that the Nanak-Panthīs stand bracketed with rather unimportant categories. But that would be a wrong impression. In the first place, the Sūfīs are also treated in this section as a category of the *fuqarā* of India. Furthermore, though the Nanak-Panthīs form only a part of a section, the space given to them is more than what is given to any whole section in this part of the book. The 'orthodox' Hindus alone get more space than the Nanak-Panthīs because three sections are given to them. The traits of the Nanak-Panthīs noted by the author of the *Dabistān* distinguish them from all other peoples treated in the book. The Sikhs did not make any distinction between Guru Nanak and his successors, regarding them all as one. Indeed, if anyone of them did not regard Guru Arjan (the fifth *mahal*) exactly as Guru Nanak (the first *mahal*) he was treated as an unbeliever (*kāfir*). Guru Hargobind used the title Nanak for himself in his letters to the author of the *Dabistān*. That explains why every Sikh was regarded as the Sikh of Guru Nanak, and why the Panth was called the Nanak-Panth.

The Sikhs looked upon their Guru as the 'true king' (*sachchā pātshāh*) in contrast with the temporal king. The Guru's representative (*gumāshta*) was called Masand (from the Persian *masnad*) to indicate his importance. The Masands used to come to the Guru at the time of Baisakhi, bringing with them offerings collected from the Sikhs, and receiving a turban from the Guru as a parting gift. A large number of persons became Sikhs of the Guru through their mediacy. There was hardly any city in the world in which there were no Sikhs, and the Masands used to collect offerings from all the cities and towns. To demonstrate that the Sikhs did not care for the distinctions of caste, the author of the *Dabistān* underlines that a *brahman* could accept a *khatri* as his leader, and a *khatri* could accept a *jāt* as his leader, though the latter belonged to the lowest category of Vaishyas. In fact many of the important Masands of the Guru were Jats, and *brahmans* and *khatri*s became Sikhs of the Guru through their mediacy. If a Sikh visited another in the name of the Guru, he was to be treated like

the Guru himself. The collective prayer of the Sikhs was regarded as more efficacious than the prayer of a single person, even that of the Guru.

Like the principle of inequality, the Sikhs rejected the idea of renunciation (*udās* or *tark-i duniya*). That was why they took either to agriculture, or trade, or service (*naukari*). Being productive, they could contribute towards the Guru's treasury. The author of the *Dabistān* observed that Guru Hargobind maintained 700 horses, 300 horsemen, and 60 matchlockmen on a permanent basis at Kiratpur. This was the result of a deliberate policy in which hunt, eating of meat, wearing of arms, and martial activities were encouraged. Being a teacher, Guru Hargobind could think of giving practical lessons to his opponents on the field of battle in effective use of the sword. The Sikhs did not observe any Brahmanical taboos about food and drink. There was nothing of the worship ('ibādāt) and austerities (*riāzāt*) stipulated by the law books of the Hindus (*shara'-i Hinduān*) among the Sikhs. The Sikh belief in transmigration distinguished them from Muslims, and the Sikh insistence on the unity of God distinguished them from Hindus. The followers of Guru Nanak had nothing to do with idols in temples. An incident is related in the *Dabistān* to underline that the Sikhs had no respect for the goddess : A Sikh of Guru Hargobind broke the nose of an idol to show how helpless the goddess was and how foolish were they who believed in her power. The Sikhs never recited the Hindu scriptures (*mantarhā-i Hunūd*). Indeed, the *bāñī* of Guru Nanak was in the language of the peasants of the Punjab (*zujān-i jattān-i Panjāb*); his followers had no concern with Sanskrit which was regarded by the Hindus as the language of gods.

## Appendix B

### *HAM HINDŪ NAHĪN*

The title *Ham Hindū Nahīn* serves as a reminder that the book was first written in Hindi. Presumably, it was addressed more to Hindus than to Sikhs. In 1898, it was published in Punjabi but the title was retained. In a later edition, Bhai Kanh Singh used its Punjabi form, *asīn hindū nahīn*, but not in the title. The Punjabi work was addressed not to the Hindus so much as to the Sikhs. This was because Bhai Kanh Singh knew that there were some Sikhs too who believed that the Sikhs were 'Hindu'. They, in his view, were ignorant of Sikh scriptures and Sikh history, and they simply accepted the interpretation of the Sikh tradition put forward by parties who were inimical towards Sikhism. Such self-interested parties were anxious to see the Sikhs merged with the Hindu 'nation' (*qaum*). Bhai Kanh Singh is not explicit on the point but in all probability he had in mind the activities of the Arya Samaj.

Presumably on a complaint from Bhai Kanh Singh's opponents, his book was officially examined from the viewpoint of his intention and its effect. The official who read it in English translation expressed the view that it was not intended to hurt the feelings of others and it contained nothing derogatory to the faith of the Hindus. Some 'Hindus' tried to refute Bhai Kanh Singh's arguments in the press. His opponents also contrived that Maharaja Hira Singh of Nabha may take action against him. The Maharaja asked the Sikhs of Amritsar for their views about the book. They were unanimous in support of Bhai Kanh Singh's exposition, and submitted their own evidence to support the view that the Khalsa Panth was distinct from both Hindus and Muslims: it was the 'Third Panth'. Bhai Kanh Singh sent a copy of his book to the Khalsa Diwan of Lahore. Its Joint Chief Secretary expressed the view that

the distinct identity of the Khalsa Panth was well established in this publication with appropriate evidence from Sikh sacred literature. The Sarbat Khalsa of Gurdwara Tambu Sahib at Muktsar praised Bhai Kanh Singh for demonstrating that the Khalsa Panth was distinct and separate from Hindus and Muslims as the ‘Third Panth’. This was the view of the Sarbat Khalsa at Damdama Sahib, Keshgarh Sahib and Huzur Sahib (Abchal Nagar). A large number of individuals wrote letters to Bhai Kanh Singh to appreciate his learned exposition.<sup>1</sup>

In 1920, a much enlarged fifth edition of *Ham Hindū Nahīn* was out. It was easily among the most influential Sikh publications of the early decades of the twentieth century. It has been reprinted and published several times afterwards for wide dissemination. Referred to as ‘Panth Ratan, Bhai Sahib, Bhai Kanh Singh Ji, Nabha’, the author is looked upon as a venerable scholar and his *Ham Hindū Nahīn* as a classic statement of Sikh identity. He was associated with the Lahore Singh Sabha and the Panch Khalsa Diwan as a radical protagonist of the Singh Sabha Movement. The general acceptance of his ideas indicates that he had the future in his bones.

Bhai Kanh Singh presents his thesis in the form of a dialogue between a Hindu and a Sikh. This enabled him to give a comprehensive treatment to the subject. All possible arguments in support of the proposition that Sikhs were Hindu come from the Hindu, and all possible arguments in support of the proposition that Sikhs have a distinct identity come from the Sikh. The book appears to reflect the whole range of arguments used on both sides in the debate during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. That may partly be the reason why *Ham Hindū Nahīn* became the most comprehensive statement on the subject of Sikh identity.<sup>2</sup>

1. Kanh Singh, Bhai, *Ham Hindū Nahīn* (Pbi). Amritsar: Dharam Parchar Committee (SGPC), 1981 (reprint of the 5th ed). Prefaces to the first and the fifth edition, and 34n1, 39n1, 77n2, 79n1 & 160n1.
2. Use of dialogic form was quite common in the late nineteenth century among all religious communities of the Punjab, perhaps following the example set by Christian missionaries.

## I

*Ham Hindū Nahīn* may informally be divided into two parts. The first part of about twenty pages relates to Sikh identity in rather general terms. According to the Hindu participant in the debate the Sikhs are Hindus because they have emerged from the Hindus; they eat food with Hindus; they enter into matrimony with Hindus; and they live in 'Hindustan'. Only recently have some Sikhs begun to talk of their separate identity. He goes on to add that the word 'Hindu' was derived from Sindhu, a Sanskrit word which means 'the conqueror of the wicked' and 'brave warrior'. The Sikh participant in the debate gives a longish reply. Talk of distinct identity was not an innovation of the contemporary Sikhs; they were simply following the injunctions of their Gurus. He quotes the *Ādi Granth* to the effect that 'we are neither Hindu nor Musalman'. He quotes Bhai Gurdas to the effect that Sikhs are distinct from both Hindus and Muslims. In further support of his argument he quotes from a *Janamsākhī*, the Thirty-Three Savviyē of Guru Gobind Singh, the *Rahitnāmas* of Bhai Chaupa Singh and Bhai Daya Singh, the *Panth Prakāsh*, the *Gurpratāp Suriyā* and the *Bhagat Ratnāvalī*.<sup>3</sup>

On the point that the Sikhs had emerged from the Hindus, the Sikh participant refers to semitic religions in which Christianity emerged from Judaism, and Islam arose out of both. In other words, just as Christianity and Islam were distinct religions so was the Sikh *dharam*. Furthermore, when a Hindu became Christian or Muslim he was not regarded as a Hindu. Therefore, a Hindu who becomes a Sikh cannot be regarded as a Hindu. On commensality, the Sikh participant refers to the *Rahitnāmas* which instruct the Khalsa not to observe distinction of caste and not to eat with those who cut their hair. Similarly, on the question of matrimony the instruction is to have connections only with the Sikhs and not with those who cut their hair. If Sikhs are Hindu because they live in 'Hindustan', why the Christians and the Muslims who live in this country are not Hindu? The name 'Hindu' was given to the people of this country by outsiders. It does not occur in the ancient Indian scriptures and the Epics. That was why the Arya Samajists insisted

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3. *Ibid.* 34-27.

that they should not be called 'Hindu' and their country should not be called 'Hindustan'. However, the Sikhs had no objection to the use of the word 'Hindustan' for the country and if 'Hindu' means 'Indian', they had no objection to the term being used for them.<sup>4</sup>

Another line of argument which Bhai Kanh Singh puts into the mouth of his Hindu participant brings in the evidence of Sikh scriptures. '*Hindū sālāhī sālāhan*' in the Granth Sahib is contended to mean that Hindu beliefs and practices are approved. The Sikh participant quotes the whole passage to show that far from being a praise of Hindu *mat* the passage in question underlines the importance of praising God and appropriating the True Name. The Hindu participant then quotes from the *Chhakkey Chhand*, attributed by him to Guru Gobind Singh, to the effect that the Khalsa Panth was meant to spread Hindu *dharma*. Therefore, Sikh *mat* was a Hindu *panth*, like the Bairāgī and Sanyāsī *panths*. The Sikhs, who equated *panth* with *qaum*, did not realize that it was necessary to have large numbers to be a *qaum*. The Sikhs counted merely in lacs. The Sikh participant points out that the *Chhand* in question was not an authentic composition of Guru Gobind Singh. Even if taken to be authentic for the sake of argument, this composition refers also to the triumph of the Khalsa as 'the third *panth*'. The other two *panths* being Hindu and Muslim, it was also clear that the Sikh Panth was to be treated as a *qaum*. According to the Hindu participant, innumerable *sākhīs* proved that Sikhs were Hindu. The Sikh participant responds to this general observation by saying that the Sikhs regarded as authentic only those *parsangs* which did not contradict the *Gurbānī*. According to the Hindu participant Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life for the sake of the Hindus because he was a Hindu. The Sikh participant replies that it was a cardinal principle of Sikh *dhamam* to protect the oppressed. Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life for a principle and not for the sake of Hindus. This was the principle for which the Sikhs made sacrifices for the country and in the cause of justice. They looked upon Hindus as their 'brothers', but they were not Hindu by religion (*mazhab*). They looked upon Christians and

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4. *Ibid.* 47-51.

Muslims also as their 'brothers'.<sup>5</sup>

## II

About a score of points are discussed in the second part of over a hundred pages. It may clarify the two opposing viewpoints better if we take up each set of arguments together. Understandably, the arguments in support of the proposition that the Sikhs are Hindu are less elaborate. Nevertheless, a number of issues are raised by the Hindu participant in the dialogue.

The first issue relates to scriptures. The references to the Vedas in the *Ādi Granth*, it is contended, are only to those hymns which talk of *giān*. But the scope of the Vedas is not confined to *giān* for they deal with *karma* and *upasana* as well. The implication is that the Vedas are not criticized in their entirety. Alternatively, the authors of the *Ādi Granth* did not have a thorough knowledge of the Vedas. In any case there are several statements in the *Ādi Granth* which recognize the sanctity and authority traditionally associated with the Vedas. As many as eight quotations are given from the *Ādi Granth* which do give the impression as if the authority and sanctity of the Vedas is acknowledged. In a few of these quotations are included Shastras, Smritis and Puranas. There is a reference also to the six schools of philosophy. Much significance is attached to the fact that Guru Nanak was a Bedi. Obviously, his ancestors at one time were known for their knowledge of the Veda. The *Bachittar Nātak* is quoted on this point: 'They who mastered the Vedas came to be known as Bedi; they propagated actions based on *dharma*'.<sup>6</sup>

The second issue relates to the system of caste (*jātīvarṇ*) among Sikhs. The claim that they did not subscribe to the *varnaśrama* ideal stands refuted by Guru Nanak's regret about the obliteration of *varna-maryāda* in his days. He castigates the *khatri* for discarding his *dharma* and adopting the language of the *mlechh*: 'the whole world has become one caste and there is no *dharma* left'. In the *Janamsākhī* of Bhai Bala, Lalo, a Tarkhan and therefore a *shudra*, presumes that Guru Nanak would not eat food cooked by him and suggests that Guru Nanak himself may

5. *Ibid*, 51-55.

6. *Ibid*, 58, 59, 59-60, 60, 61, 62, 63, &b 64.

prepare his food. He had seen the sacred thread (*janjū*) worn by Guru Nanak. The point at issue therefore is whether or not high-caste Sikhs wore the sacred thread, a practice which had a bearing on the question of *varna-maryāda*. A quotation from Guru Nanak's compositions is cited to confirm that he used to wear the sacred thread. In the *Bachittar Nātak* it is stated that Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life to save the *tilak* and *janjū* of the Hindus. Guru Gobind Singh wrote *savviyey* in praise of Brahmans and instructed his followers to give *dān* to them. In the *Sukhmani* the Sikhs are instructed to revere the *pandit* who understands the Vedas, Smritis and the Puranas.<sup>7</sup>

The third point relates to the idea of incarnation. Several *parsangs* in the *Dasam Granth* prove, it is contended, that Guru Gobind Singh believed in *avtārs*. A quotation carries the import that one could attain to liberation from transmigration by worshipping Krishna. Even in the *Ādi Granth* there is a passage in which various *avtārs* are mentioned with the idea that they were to be worshipped. Another related issue was that of the worship of the Goddess among the Sikhs. There is a statement in the *Bachittar Nātak* that Guru Gobind Singh invoked the Goddess (Kalika). The whole of this *Chandī Charitar* is written in praise of the Goddess (Chandī); and the merit of reciting her praise is underlined. Above all, in the Sikh prayer (*ardās*) the Goddess (*bhagwati*) is invoked first of all. Since the term used in Gurmukhi is *bhagautī*, the Hindu participant suggests that Guru Gobind Singh originally wrote it in the Persian script in which it was hard to make a distinction between *bhagwati* and *bhagautī*, and the Gurmukhi scribe accepted the latter reading out of ignorance.<sup>8</sup>

The fifth point relates to idol-worship. It is stated in the *Granth Sahib* that Namdev attainted to God through the worship of an idol and that Dhanna found God in a piece of stone. The references in the *Vārs* of Bhai Gurdas to Dhanna and Namdev prove further that the Sikhs had no objection to idol-worship. Furthermore, the Sikhs regard the *Granth Sahib* as the physical form (*sarūp*) of the Guru and offer *karāh* in a dish by way of *bhog* to the *Granth Sahib*.

7. *Ibid*, 69, 77, 78, 769, 81 & 82.

8. *Ibid*, 86-87, 87, 97 & 100.

This is similar to idol-worship.<sup>9</sup> According to the Hindu participant, Guru Nanak observed his father's *shradha* only two days before his own death. The Sikh Gurus used to go to sacred places for pilgrimage. In a composition of Guru Amar Das there are clear instructions regarding what was to be done after his death, including the *kathā* of the Purān by Keso Gopal. The verse also refers to *pind*, *pattal*, *kiryā*, *dīwā* and *phull*.<sup>10</sup> This was meant to show that these practices were commonly observed by Hindus and Sikhs. Indeed, the Hindu participant asserts that no injunction of the Gurus forbids Sikhs to perform their rites in accordance with the Hindu Shastras, and there was no injunction to have separate Sikh rites (*gur-maryāda*). The *chhants*, *ghoriān* and *lāvān*, composed by the Guru and recited by the Sikhs at the time of marriage, were not meant to be taken literally for the actual conduct of rites (*vivhār*); they were meant to be taken as metaphors. Even if it is conceded that Sikhs have their own *sanskārs*, the symbols like the *kesh* and the *kachh* were adopted as temporary measures in a situation of armed conflict. They were no longer necessary. Similarly it was not necessary to keep uncut hair; the first nine Gurus had no *kesh*.<sup>11</sup>

The Hindu participant raises three more issues. The first relates to the basic principles of Hindu Dharma which, he maintains, are shared by the Sikhs with Hindus. To regard the Vedas, which formed the basis of Hindu Dharma, as true was the first principle. To subscribe to belief in God, good and evil, heaven and hell, was the second. The five other basic principles were: to seek *mukti* from transmigration, to regard *varnashrama* as the ideal social order, to cremate the dead, to protect the cow, and to uphold the idea of purity and pollution. The second issue raised by the Hindu participant is that even if Sikh *dharam*, Sikh principles, and Sikh rites and ceremonies were different from those of the Hindus, the Sikhs were governed by the Hindu Law. Thirdly, it was not really politic on the part of the Sikhs to separate themselves from the Hindus. All such attempts increased mutual hostility. The Sikhs were small in numbers and they were bound to suffer great loss

9. *Ibid*, 108 & 109.

10. *Ibid*, 132.

11. *Ibid*, 146 & 151.

through separation from the Hindus. By aligning themselves with the Hindus, who had now become important, the Sikhs could increase their own importance.<sup>12</sup>

### III

According to the Sikh participant, the Sikhs have their own scripture in Guru Granth Sahib. Other religious books among the Sikhs are judged as authentic to the extent they accord with the Granth. Justification for this exclusive status of the Granth Sahib is found in the compositions of the Gurus and in other Sikh literature. Guru Amar Das emphasized the superiority of the *bāñī* of the Guru over other *bāñīs* which are looked upon as 'unripe' (*kachchī*). *Gurbāñī* is the light of the world; it leads to the Divine Name. According to Guru Ram Das *gur-sabad* is above everything else. The Sikhs of the Guru regard it as true: the creator Himself made the Guru to utter it. What the Gurus say about other scriptures should be seen in conjunction with the indispensability of the true *bāñī* underlined by the Gurus. About a score of quotations from the *Ādi-Granth*, the *Bachittar Nātak*, the *Rām Avitār*, the *Thirty-Three Savviyey* and the works of Bhai Gurdas underline the inefficacy of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras for attaining to emancipation. The semitic books are often bracketed with Hindu religious scriptures. Bhai Gurdas includes the Puranas, the Epics and the *Gīta* in the list of religious books which stood rejected in comparison with *Gurbāñī*. The Sikh participant explains that, unlike the Veda, *Gurbāñī* was meant for all human beings. Furthermore, the Sikh conception of *karma*, *upāsana* and *giān* is totally different from what they mean among the Hindus. The lines and phrases quoted by the Hindu participant are refuted by the Sikh participant either by providing the full text to explain the correct meaning or by quoting other passages for clarifying the meaning, or by doing both. The final conclusion drawn on the point of scriptures is that the only valid religious book for the Sikhs is Guru Granth Sahib, and no other scripture.<sup>13</sup>

On the issue of the *varna* system, the Sikh participant quotes

12. *Ibid*, 152, 153 & 158.

13. *Ibid*, 55-65.

passages from Manu and other authorities which exalt the position of the Brahman and his rights and privileges, and which underline the disabilities of the *shudra* and his over-all depression and deprivation. The message of the Guru is meant for all the four *varnas* and even for the *chandāls*. The path is open to all because the whole of mankind is believed to have been created from the same light (*nūr*). Guru Nanak castigated those Khatriś who had abandoned their faith. Had he believed that Persian language was *mlechh-bhāshā* he would not have composed in Persian, and Guru Gobind Singh would not have written his *Zafarnāma* in Persian. The idea of equality in the Sikh Panth is underlined at many places in the *Ādi Granth* and in the *Vārs* of Bhai Gurdas. More than a score of quotations on this point are cited from these and other sources like the *Akāl Ustat*, the *Gurpratāp Suriyā* and the *Rahitnāmas* of Bhai Chaupa Singh and Bhai Daya Singh. The *sākhī* of Lalo Tarkhān demonstrates that Guru Nanak ate food cooked by a *shudra*. For that reason alone the point about the sacred thread loses its significance. The line quoted from the *Ādi Granth* by the Hindu participant, placed in its proper context, also shows that Guru Nanak discarded the distinctions of caste. In the *Bachittar Nāīak*, quoted by the Hindu participant, *tilak* and *janjū* were clearly the sacred mark and the sacred thread of the Brahmans who had approached Guru Tegh Bahadur for help. An incident narrated in the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* indicates that Sikhs attached no sanctity to the sacred thread even before the Khalsa was instituted. Furthermore, the Gurus wanted their Sikhs to give *dān* not to Brahmans but to Sikhs. The *Savviyey* of Guru Gobind Singh were not in praise of Brahmans but in favour of the Khalsa who were to receive all kinds of gifts. In the *Sukhmani* too Guru Arjan emphasizes the qualities which make any person a true *brahman* (and not the Brahman of *varnashrama*). The *Pandit* of the Hindu social order is denounced by Guru Nanak and his successors. Appropriate quotations are given from the compositions of Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das and Guru Arjan on the point.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of incarnation stands discarded in Sikh *dharam*. God is never born; He never dies; He does not take any form. The so-

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14. *Ibid.* 65-84.

called *avtārs* are God's creatures, and they too are in search of emancipation. In support of this view, quotations are given from the *Ādi Granth*, the *Shabad Hazārey*, the *Thirty-Three Savviyey* and the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal. If Krishna is mentioned in the *Krishan Avtār*, it must be remembered that this work was meant to be a free version of a received account, and the ideas it contained could not be taken as the views of Guru Gobind Singh. In the *Marū Sohiley*, Guru Arjan refers to beliefs prevalent among others; his own view is expressed in the last line, indicating his preference for the True Name. The use of epithets for God derived from the names of *avtārs* did not mean that God of the Sikh *dharam* becomes equated with them. Rather, a new meaning is given to those epithets. The transformation in the meaning is comparable to the transformation of *allah* as the divinity of pre-Islamic Arabs into Allah of the Prophet Muhammad, or the transformation of the Teuton 'god' into the Christian God in English.<sup>15</sup>

As God's creatures, gods and goddesses stand bracketed with *avtārs*. They were all a part of *māyā*. Like the other creatures of God, they seek emancipation. Neither Brahma nor Bishan nor Mahesh can be equated with God. They all serve God who alone is to be worshipped. These ideas find support in the *Ādi Granth*, the *Akāl Ustat*, the *Thirty-Three Savviyey*, the *Jāp Sāhib*, the *Shabad Hazārey*, the *Rahitnāma* of Bhai Daya Singh, and the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal.<sup>16</sup> The use of the term Kalika in the *Chandī dī Vār* is used for Akāl Purakh and not for the Goddess. Durga in the same composition is mentioned as created by God. Since the *Chandī dī Vār* was a popular version of the *Durgā Saptshatī*, every idea mentioned in the composition could not be ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>17</sup> In the *Bachittar Nāatak*, Guru Gobind Singh is explicit on the point that none other than God is to be worshipped.<sup>18</sup> To argue that ritualistic purification was hygienic was a futile rationalization because the ritual itself was based on

15. *Ibid*, 85-89.

16. *Ibid*, 89-105.

17. *Ibid*, 105-10.

18. *Ibid*, 110-11.

superstition.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the practice of plastering the ground with cowdung and drawing a circle around (*chaunka-kār*) which, among other things, was insisted upon by Manu was denounced by the Gurus. Bhai Chaupa Singh in his *Rahitnāma*, forbids the use of cow-dung in the *langar*. The author of the *Gurpratāp Suriyā* states that the Sikh sacred food (*deg*) was meant for all the four *varnas*. The author of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* also conveys the impression that there was no restriction on food among the Sikhs. The only criterion was that it should not be harmful for the body.<sup>20</sup> Quotations from the *Ādi Granth*, the *Vārs* of Bhai Gurdas, the *Rahitnāma* of Bhai Daya Singh and the *Gurpratāp Suriyā* support the view that fasting on days like Janamashtami, Ram Naomi and Ekadasi was rejected by the Gurus and their followers. Observing fast was a sign of ignorance (*agiān*).<sup>21</sup> So was the notion of auspicious and inauspicious days and moments. Quotations from the *Ādi Granth*, the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal, and the *Gurbilās Pātshāhi Chhey* show that the notions of *mahūrat*, *tīth*, *vār* and *sagan* were discarded by the Gurus and their followers.<sup>22</sup> The idea of the efficacy of *mantras*, *tantras* and *jantras* in enhancing the spiritual and physical prowess of individuals, giving them supernatural powers or longevity or sexual virility, stood discarded in *Gurmat*.<sup>23</sup> The performance of *hom* or *yagg* was also discarded. These views are supported with quotations from the *Ādi Granth*, the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal, and the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.<sup>24</sup> In response to Swami Daya Nand's insistence on *hom* as the key ritual of the Aryas, it is argued that the supposed purification of the atmosphere involved a great loss of materials which could be more useful to human beings if put to their ordinary use.<sup>25</sup>

The rites of *kiryā*, *shradha* and *tīrath* are taken up together as related to death. The *Janamsākhī* statement that Guru Nanak

19. *Ibid*, 111-13.

20. *Ibid*, 114-17.

21. *Ibid*, 118-23.

22. *Ibid*, 123-26.

23. *Ibid*, 138-42.

24. *Ibid*, 142-45.

25. *Ibid*, 143-44n2.

observed *shradha* for his father only two days before his own death, is not based on authentic information. The correct position is depicted in the *Gurū Nānak Prakāsh* in which Guru Nanak rejects the practice of *shradha*. The *Sadd* of Guru Amar Das in *Rāg Rāmkalī*, which is supposed to prescribe *kiryā* after his death, is not properly understood. It was written with reference to a hymn of Guru Nanak in which the word 'Keso' refers to God. Therefore the Keso of the *Sadd* is no other than God. Furthermore at several places in his compositions, Guru Amar Das himself denounces the *pandit*, and whatever he does.<sup>26</sup> Mourning with loud lamentations was denounced by Guru Nanak. He prepared *karāh parshād* after Mardana's death, according to a *Janamsākhī*. According to the *Giān Ratnāvalī*, *kiryā* was replaced by *ardās*, *kīrtan* and *karāh parshād*. According to the *Gursobha* and Bhai Chaupa Singh the ceremony of *bhaddan* was not to be observed. The Gurus went to the places of Hindu pilgrimage not as pilgrims but to preach their own message to the people assembled there.<sup>27</sup>

The *gur-maryāda* regarding birth, initiation and marriage had nothing to do with Hindu *mat*. Guru Amar Das uttered the *Anand* at the birth of his grandson and instructed the Sikhs to recite this composition at the birth of a child. Guru Arjan did this, as referred to in one of his hymns, at the birth of his son Hargobind. Guru Ram Das composed *chhants*, *ghoriān* and *lāvān* for the occasion of marriage. A close attention to these compositions makes one realize that they were meant to be used on the occasion of marriage. They refer to the bridegroom and the marriage party, the young married couple, and the custom of displaying dowry (*dāj*). Guru Gobind Singh performed the marriage of a Sikh girl in accordance with this rite. Bhai Daya Singh in his *Rahitnāma* insists that Sikhs should not adopt any ceremony of marriage other than 'anand'. For initiation Guru Nanak introduced the practice of *charan-pahul*, which was followed by all his successors before Guru Gobind Singh introduced *khande kā amrit*. He also instructed the Sikhs to observe *rahit* and adopt certain symbols like *kachh* and *karā*. There is no evidence to suggest that Khalsa symbols were meant to be a

26. *Ibid.* 127-28.

27. *Ibid.* 149-51.

temporary measure for the times of war. There was no certainty that wars had ended for all times to come. The Sikh Gurus used to keep uncut hair (*kesh*). There are several references in the *Ādi Granth* to the long hair serving metaphorically as a fan or a *chaur*.<sup>28</sup>

Responding to the seven ‘universal’ principles mentioned by his Hindu counterpart, the Sikh participant denies that the Vedas are the basis of Sikh *dharam*. Belief in God, *punn* and *pāp*, reward and punishment, is not confined to Hindus or Sikhs. Similarly, belief in transmigration was not confined to Hindus and Sikhs in the history of mankind. The Sikhs did not subscribe to the ideal of *varnashrama*. Cremation was not the only practice among either Hindus or Sikhs. While *jal-parwāh* was known to both Hindus and Sikhs there were Hindus who practised burial rather than cremation. Cow protection was rationally desirable, but the Sikhs did not have the same kind of attitude towards the cow as the Hindus. The dung and urine of the cow were not used by the Sikhs in any way similar to their use among the Hindus. In the Vedas, there are references to *gomedha* and *goghana*, the former in the context of ritual sacrifice and the latter involving the slaughter of a cow for entertaining a special guest. Finally, the Sikhs did not subscribe to the idea of pollution. Thus, the basic principles which the Hindu participant maintained were common to both Hindus and Sikhs are denied by the Sikh participant either because of their absence among the Sikhs or because of their presence among others too. He goes on to add that, like the Hindu gods, the principles to be found among the Hindus were innumerable. Consequently, even the census reports failed to clarify one’s ideas about who was a Hindu. That there was no acceptable definition was not surprising, because the word ‘Hindu’ did not occur in the sacred books of the Hindus. They were the only people in the world to have accepted a name given to them by outsiders.<sup>29</sup>

On the question of Hindu Law being applicable to the Sikhs, the Sikh participant points out that the law operative in the country was no longer the Hindu Law. It was mostly customary law that was operative among the Sikhs. There were no legal codes based

28. *Ibid.* 146-49.

29. *Ibid.* 153-56.

entirely on religious books. Laws based on religious books did not come into operation immediately on the appearance of a new religious system. This did not happen in Islam or Christianity. So far as the Sikhs were concerned, the basic principles had been enunciated in *Gurbāñī* and the *Rahitnāmas*. The Anand Marriage Act had also been passed. Thus, the possibility of preparing a Sikh code of laws had been created. Sir Lepel Griffin had observed that the Sikhs had 'abandoned the Hindu faith, and with it the system of laws which is the basis of that faith' and for fifty years the Sikh chiefs had followed laws of succession which were altogether different. To invoke the legal authority of Manu and the Shastras by Hindu converts to Sikhism would have been as unreasonable as to invoke the *sharī'at* by Muslim converts to the Sikh faith.<sup>30</sup>

Whether or not they were Hindu, was it politic on the part of the Sikhs to insist that they must be treated as a separate people? The answer is quite unambiguous. No progress (*unīti*) is possible without becoming independent (*sautantar*). To be a branch (*shākh*) of another *qaum* is to remain in 'slavery' (*ghulāmī*), and such subordination involved all kinds of depression. The Sikhs loved their neighbours and looked upon their tribulation as their own, but they could not be treated as a part of another people in terms of religious and social principles. They had already suffered for becoming one (*ikk-mikk*) with the Hindus. The Sikhs lost in numbers; their wealth went into the hands of Brahmans through *dān* and *dakshina*. The vested interests among the Hindus made every possible effort to dissuade Sikhs from retaining their religious symbols. Many Sikh families reverted to the Hindu fold and many others entered into matrimony with Hindus. While the Sikhs were told that Sikhism did not lie in the *kesh* or the *kachh*, no one told the Hindus that their *dharma* did not lie in the *janjū* or the *bodī*. If mutual hostility was increasing it was due to the hostile attitude of some Hindus towards the Sikh faith. Aggression came precisely from those Hindus whose interests were bound to be hit if Sikhs were treated as a separate *qaum*. They were keen to own the Sikhs in self-interest. They were joined by the self-styled *gurūs* among the Sikhs. These selfish people published books and articles to

30. *Ibid.*, 156-58.

show that the Sikhs were Hindu.<sup>31</sup>

Not to create hostility among various religious communities was in the interest of the country as a whole. Difference of religion should not be allowed to become a cause of conflict. Everyone should have the freedom to pursue and propagate one's religion. However, everyone should do this in such a manner that he does not create resentment among others. The Sikhs should know that they are not Hindu, but they should also know that it is their duty to love their countrymen as brothers and to look upon all the peoples of Bharat as inseparable organs of the same body.<sup>32</sup> These obviously are the sentiments of Bhai Kahn Singh himself. He expressed these views directly in his 'appeal' to the reader in 1920. Sikh *dharam* is different from Hindu and other *dharma*s, and Sikhs are a separate *qaum*. It does not follow, however, that they should criticize other *dharma*s or oppose other people. Not to regard the *desh-bhāis* as a limb (*ang*) of the same body is to invite curse from the land of one's birth (*janam-bhūmi*). We have one father, and we are all his children. All are our friends and we are friendly towards everyone. They who create animosity and division by mixing up matters of religion (*dharam*), politics (*nīti*) and society (*saṁāj*) are bound to suffer here (*lok*) and in the hereafter (*parlok*). They do not deserve the title of 'human beings', much less the title of 'God's progeny'. They who belong to different *dharma*s and yet regard themselves as a part of one 'Nation' earn respect and honour from civilized nations.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV

We have followed the text of *Ham Hindū Nahīn* rather closely in order to ensure that we do not miss any relevant point in Bhai Kahn Singh's exposition of Sikh identity. If we were to set aside the sequence of his arguments and omit minor detail, we can present his basic thesis in terms more easily understandable. It is quite clear that Bhai Kahn Singh wrote his book at a time when communitarian consciousness was gaining ground among an increasing number of people in the Punjab, as in the rest of the

31. *Ibid*, 158-63.

32. *Ibid*, 163.

33. *Ibid*, 13.

country. In other words, the emergence of communitarian consciousness was not confined to the Sikhs.

The most important aspect of Bhai Kanh Singh's book from our viewpoint is his thesis that a distinctive Sikh identity was not a new thing. The authorities which he invokes in support of this thesis are nearly all pre-colonial: the *Ādi Granth* which was compiled in 1603-04, the works of Bhai Gurdas written mostly in the early decades of the seventeenth century, the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh and others in the *Dasam Granth* which were written mostly before the end of the seventeenth century, the works of Bhai Nand Lal as a contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh, the *Gursobhā* which was written a few years after Guru Gobind Singh's death, the *Rahitnāmas* which were composed largely in the eighteenth century, the *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das* which was written towards the end of the century, the *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Chhey*, and the works of Bhai Santokh Singh which were composed in the early nineteenth century. At a few places the evidence of *Janamsākhīs*, which were compiled in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, is also invoked. This literature was not only pre-colonial but also voluminous, and it covered a wide range. A present-day scholar can be more critical in accepting the evidence of this literature on empirical realities, but for ideas and norms it is not easy for anyone to disagree with Bhai Kanh Singh.

Sikh scriptures according to Bhai Kanh Singh underline belief in one God, reject the existence of gods and goddesses as independent entities, discard the ideas of incarnation and therefore the belief in *avtārs*, and reject idol-worship. Pilgrimage to places traditionally regarded as sacred has no merit and is therefore denounced and discarded. The only authoritative scripture for the Sikhs is the *Ādi Granth* which came to be regarded as the Guru. The Sikh mode of worship consisted of the recitation of *Gurbāñī* after a bath early in the morning, participation in *kīrtan* and recitation of *Gurbāñī* in the evening. The Sikh mode of initiation consisted of baptism (*amrit*), as *charan-pahul* first and as *khande kī pahul* with the institution of the Khalsa. The Sikh code of conduct related to the personal and social life of the Sikhs, and their relations with the outsiders. Among the religious symbols of the Sikhs three

items are specifically mentioned as important: *kesh*, *kachh* and *karā*. With the *kesh* was associated the turban, and *kangha*. The identity indicated by these items is the Singh identity. However, Bhai Kanh Singh is quite categorical on the point that the *Sahajdhārīs* and the pre-Khalsa Sikhs also possessed a distinctive identity.<sup>34</sup>

For the rites of passage, Bhai Kanh Singh refers to Guru Nanak's denunciation of mourning as the basis for the rites after death. For birth, however, his earliest reference is to Guru Amar Das. Similarly, for the rites of marriage he refers to Guru Ram Das. By the eighteenth century there was a good deal of insistence on all the Sikh rites of passage. For commensality, the principle was to make no distinction of caste. The Sikhs used to eat together in the *langar*. For matrimony, Sikhs were to confine their relations to Sikhs. All human beings were God's children and the path of liberation was open to them all. The caste system was discarded by the Gurus. Thus, the distinct identity of the Sikhs was based on their religious beliefs and practices, their exclusive scripture which guided them like the Guru, their egalitarian institutions, their distinctive rites of passage, and their social usages. This distinctive identity was deliberately created by the Gurus.

## V

The question that we can ask now is why did Bhai Kanh Singh look upon the issue of Sikh identity as of vital importance to the Sikhs? He had a vague apprehension that the attitude of a section of the Hindus towards the Sikh faith and its representatives was undergoing change. For political reasons they were insisting that the Sikhs were Hindu. We happen to know better the kind of change that was coming about. As Bhai Kanh Singh says, the term Hindu does not occur in the ancient Indian scriptures; it was used for the Indians by outsiders. We know that its use was quite common in Persian and Arabic literature by the tenth century of the Christian era. 'Hindu' in this usage meant 'Indian'. The term used for the country was either 'Hind', as in al-Beruni's *Kitāb al-Hind*, or 'Hindustan', as in the *Tuzk-i Bāburi*. With the coming of the Turks,

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34. *Ibid*, 43n1 & 74n2.

Persians, Arabs and others into India and the conversion of a considerable number of Indians to Islam, 'Hindu' came to be contrasted with 'Muslim'. The religious criterion was introduced by inversion. What is more important, the identity 'Hindu' came to be accepted by many who were called Hindu. In this sense, every non-Muslim Indian was Hindu.

A much more important change occurred during the nineteenth century. The term 'Hinduism' came into currency. It was meant to refer to the 'religion of the Hindus'. But there was no single religion. The process of exclusion and inclusion began almost simultaneously. Affinities were perceived between Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktaism, and differences were noticed between all these on the one hand and Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism on the other. The Brahmanical traditions appeared to represent 'Hinduism'. The major Sanskrit texts 'rediscovered' by Europeans appeared to support this construct.

Furthermore, the western writers who took interest in 'Hinduism' were often Christian missionaries, full of evangelical fervour and optimistic about a dramatic success in their missionary enterprise. For various reasons, they generally attacked 'Hinduism' in strong terms, trying to demonstrate that it was spiritually bankrupt and morally corrupt. Before long, educated Indians rose in defence of 'Hinduism', unconsciously accepting the monolithic construct in the process. The beginning of this development can be seen in the career of Raja Ram Mohan Rai from a cosmopolitan humanist to the founder of the Brahmo Samaj. In spite of all their catholicity and appreciation for Christianity, the Brahmos worked for 'reformed' Hinduism. When they came to the Punjab many people felt attracted to Brahmo 'reform'. The most notable Sikh who dedicated his life to the Brahmo Samaj was Dyal Singh Majithia. He is remembered every year by the trustees of *The Tribune* which was his creation, besides the Dyal Singh College and the Dyal Singh Library. On his death in 1898, his widow went to the court to contest his will for creating these institutions with his property. She lost. It was popularly believed that she lost because Dyal Singh was regarded as a Hindu. This, *inter multa alia*, became a cause for the passage of the Anand Marriage Act in 1909. What is relevant

for our purpose, 'reformed' Hinduism as a monolithic construct was seen by many Sikhs as a threat to their own separate identity.

Threat to the separate existence of Sikhism was reinforced by Swami Dayanand. He had no appreciation for any of the existing religious traditions. Though his criticism of the Sikh faith was milder than his condemnation of Christianity, Islam and the Puranic Hindu tradition, it was enough to indicate that the Sikh tradition had no place in his 'reformed' religion. It is true that Swami Dayanand never talked of Hinduism, and he did not like even the use of the term Hindu. But this literal accuracy can lead us astray from his essential position. He stood for one religion for all the people of the country. His trinity of Arya Dharma, Arya Bhasha (that is, Hindi), and Aryavarta was meant to revive the glories of India in all spheres of life. The more militant among the Punjabi Aryas had no hesitation in criticizing the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scriptures in rather strident terms. Sikhism in their view had outlived its purpose. The Arya programme of *shuddhī*, a purificatory rite meant to bring into the Arya fold all converts to Christianity and Islam, was logically extended to Sikhs in due course.<sup>35</sup> Whereas the Brahmins used to ask the Sikhs to remove their *kachh* and *karā* temporarily for ritual purposes, the Aryas were prepared to remove their *kesh* permanently, and deliberately in public. The symbolic significance of this stance was never lost on the Sikhs.

The Singh Sabha founded at Lahore in 1879, two years after the foundation of the Arya Samaj in Lahore itself, proved to be more militant than the Amritsar Singh Sabha. Its leaders contested every inch of the ground with the Aryas. The last two decades of the nineteenth century were marked, among several other controversies, by the Arya-Sikh controversy over matters religious and social. The issue of identity arose out of this protracted controversy. It was in this context that Bhai Kanh Singh wrote his *Ham Hindū Nahīn*, responding to what he perceived as a threat to a tradition which he cherished. He was not alone. He represented the views and feelings of an increasing number of Sikhs who prized the Sikh tradition. In this process, two things from the earlier Sikh

35. W. Kenneth Jones. *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab*. Delhi: Manohar, 1976.

tradition were brought to the fore and given much greater importance: the *Ādi Granth* as the exclusive scripture of the Sikhs, and the Singh identity as the preferred Sikh identity. It made the Sikhs visibly distinct from the Hindus to obviate the possibility of any confusion. Neither the doctrine of Guru Granth nor the Singh identity was new. What was new was the emphasis laid on both. A serious concern for preserving and promoting the Sikh tradition may now appear to be obvious but this dimension has been generally overlooked in explanations which harp on the mundane interests of a new middle class.

Bhai Kanh Singh raises the question of losses and gains. He refers to the advantages of education and the importance of the material resources of the community. However, a far more serious concern of Bhai Kanh Singh was the recognition of the Sikh Panth as a political community. To be recognized as a *qaum* on the basis of their identity was in the best interests of the Sikhs. The Sikh Panth of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a distinct entity. The Khalsa of the eighteenth century was a political community. Therefore, the word *panth* was synonymous with *qaum*, that is, a socio-religious community which was also a political community. The Indian Nation consisted of three *qaums*: Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. Indian 'nationalism' was a common enterprise of all these nationalities and it should empower all nationalities alike.

What was new in Bhai Kanh Singh's book was his view that Sikh identity made the Sikhs a political community. Consequently, 'Sikh' politics were defined as politics based on Sikh identity. Incidentally, this was the view of the Chief Khalsa Diwan before and after 1920. This was the view of the Akalis before and after 1947. This was the view also of the recent militant movement for Khalistan. That is why Bhai Kanh Singh's *Ham Hindū Nahīn* can be looked upon as a declaration of Sikh ethnicity. Its invocation in different situations also shows that there is no inevitable link between Sikh identity and a particular form of political articulation or mobilization.

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